

Gunilla Bexar

The Great Irish Famine in History-Writing and Prose Fiction

"The Mutual Interplay of Two Narrative Genres"





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Åbo Akademi University Press
Tavastgatan 13, FI-20500 Åbo, Finland
Tel. +358 (0)2 215 3478
E-mail: forlaget@abo.fi

Sales and distribution:
Åbo Akademi University Library
Domkyrkogatan 2–4, FI-20500 Åbo, Finland
Tel. +358 (0)2 -215 4190
E-mail: publikationer@abo.fi

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PROSE FICTION



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Åbo Akademis förlag | Åbo Akademi University Press
Åbo, Finland, 2016

CIP Cataloguing in Publication

Bexar, Gunilla.

The great Irish famine in history-writing
and prose fiction : "the mutual interplay
of two narrative genres" / Gunilla
Bexar. - Åbo : Åbo Akademi University
Press, 2016.

Diss.: Åbo Akademi University.

ISBN 978-951-765-824-9

ISBN 978-951-765-824-9
ISBN 978-951-765-825-6 (digital)
Painosalama Oy
Åbo 2016

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Acknowledgements

A version of parts of Chapters 1 and 2 appeared in *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2007), and a version of part of Chapter 4 in Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literary Community-Making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2012).

My most heartfelt thanks go to my long-time supervisor, Professor Emeritus Roger D. Sell. When I embarked on this project, Åbo Akademi had no researcher who was interested in the Irish Famine or in Irish literature and history. Nevertheless, Professor Sell's belief in the relevance and importance of my chosen subject spurred me to pursue it, and his comments on the early drafts of the thesis proved invaluable. His support and input, not to speak of his patience and encouragement when progress was slow, have enabled me to go on with and eventually complete this study. Thanks also to Professor Tuija Virtanen-Ulfhjelm for practical advice and support during the last stages of the project.

I want to thank Professor Margaret Kelleher of University College Dublin for taking the time to give me feedback on my initial thesis statement, and for her useful suggestions on how to approach the theoretical issues involved. I am grateful to Dr Eóin Flannery for his constructive and helpful commentary on my manuscript. Thanks to Trinity College Dublin for allowing me access to the Berkeley Library, and to the staff of the National Library of Ireland for their kind assistance.

Many thanks to Grace Moloney of the Clogher Historical Society for providing me with essential source material and useful information. Thanks also to my fellow doctoral students at Åbo Akademi, who commented on the first drafts of some of my thesis chapters in our seminars. I am grateful to James Rogers, editor of the *New Hibernia Review*, who kindly sent me copies of articles that I would not otherwise have had access to. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my landlady, Mrs Gemma Rafferty, who took such good care of me and helped with a number of practical matters while I did research in Dublin in 2001, 2003 and 2004.

This study would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the H. W. Donner Fund. Apart from the scholarship grants I have received over several years, this fund also provided me with travel grants for research in Ireland and to attend the 2004 conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures in Galway.

Immersing oneself in the history and literature of the Great Irish Famine can be both unsettling and depressing at times because of the appalling human suffering involved. When the going was rough, family and friends provided much needed respite. I want to thank Maria Malin for her moral support and her help with sundry practical matters. Special thanks are due to my husband, Max Gustafsson, for his patience with my mood swings and procrastinations during a long, and at times difficult process, and for his unfaltering belief in my ability to finish the project.

I dedicate this book to Eugene McCabe, whose *Tales from the Poorhouse* was pivotal in my decision to make the representation of the Famine in twentieth-century prose fiction in relation to different phases of historical writing the subject of my thesis.

INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as a 'true' history. Each is a version of what has taken place, and everybody who writes is coming from somewhere.

John McGahern¹

History is not just an accumulation of events, but crucially also the human experience of those events.

Joep Leerssen²

The literature of a nation is far more revealing than all the official histories ever written.

John Broderick³

In September 1845, the potato crop in Ireland was partly destroyed by a hitherto unknown fungus, *phytophthora infestans*, which was first observed in the eastern United States in 1843. This fungus, commonly referred to as potato blight, attacked the leaves and the stalk of the potato plant first, causing them to blacken and shrivel, before it turned the tubers into a putrid, stinking mass. The blight reappeared the following year, and now the destruction was rapid and total. In August, Fr Theobald Mathew wrote:

On the 27th of last month I passed from Cork to Dublin, and this doomed plant bloomed in all the luxuriance of an abundant harvest. Returning on the 3rd instant, I beheld with sorrow one wide waste of putrefying vegetation. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly [at] the destruction that had left them foodless.⁴

According to the historian James S. Donnelly, Jr, at that time "as many as 4.7 million people, out of a total of about 8.5 million, depended on ... [the potato] as the predominant item in their diet", while "some 3.3 million had a diet consisting more or less exclusively of potatoes."⁵ For these people, particularly those in the latter category, the total crop failure in 1846 spelled imminent

¹ John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 12.

² Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 4.

³ John Broderick, "Roots", *Irish Times*, 19 January 1980, p. 13.

⁴ Quoted in James S. Donnelly, Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), p. 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

starvation. The crop was free of blight in 1847, but since the acreage planted was much smaller than in previous years due to the scarcity of seed potatoes, the yield was inadequate to fill the starvation gap. In spite of government relief measures such as the importation of maize from America, public works and soup kitchens, the natural disaster of the potato blight developed into full-scale famine. As the number of deaths from lack of food mounted, the suffering of the poor was exacerbated by typhus and other famine-related diseases. Workhouses and fever hospitals became overcrowded, and evictions carried out by landlords or their agents added to the distress of the severely afflicted people. Famine continued unabated in 1848 when the blight again destroyed at least half of the total crop, and although there was no general failure in 1849, blight recurred in many districts. During these two years, continuing mass evictions in different parts of the country left large numbers of starving people without shelter since the workhouses could not accommodate them all. By 1851, deaths and emigration brought about by famine had reduced the population of Ireland to 6.6 million.⁶

When famine struck, Ireland had been a part of Great Britain since 1801 when the Act of Union became law. How was it that famine on such an enormous scale and with such devastating consequences could occur at the heart of the wealthiest empire on earth? Ever since the event of the Great Irish Famine, historians and writers of fiction have attempted to explain this apparent anomaly. As Margaret Kelleher has noted, in the field of history,

[t]he subject of famine's causation and the related issue of government responsibility have proved to be fiercely divisive issues in studies of the Great Famine, and also serve to differentiate the major strands in Irish famine historiography.⁷

These “major strands” comprise three different approaches to the interpretation of the Famine: nationalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist. In this study, one of the things I am examining is how the nationalist historiography phase determines the representation of the Famine in John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1861), how the revisionist historiography is reflected in Edwards and Williams's *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52* (1956), and how Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (1962) anticipates the post-revisionist historiography that shapes Christine Kinealy's

⁶ Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p. 94.

⁷ Margaret Kelleher, “The Irish Famine: History and Representation”, in Mary McAuliffe et al (eds), *Palgrave Advances in Irish History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 84-99 [88].

This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52 (1994) and James S. Donnelly's *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (2001). In *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, Mitchel (who was not a professional historian) blamed the British government for the disaster, claiming that their refusal to prohibit exports of food from a country hit by famine, their adherence to the principles of political economy, and their inadequate relief measures were nothing but contrivances to exterminate the Irish people. In his view, the government was guilty of genocide. His interpretation was embraced by nationalists in Ireland as well as by Irish emigrants in North America who felt that they had been forced to leave their native land, and in one form or another it has survived in the popular imagination to this day. Revisionist historians did not credit Mitchel's version of the Famine in any way. As they saw it, the government did all they could under the circumstances, and Mitchel's claim that they deliberately sought to exterminate the Irish people was unjustifiable. They dismissed the nationalist reading of the Famine as a myth based on political propaganda and emotive response rather than on historical facts. When Cecil Woodham-Smith's account appeared in 1962, it was more or less spurned by revisionist historians on similar grounds. They held that she attached too much blame to the government (and to certain individuals within the administration), and that her account, which included the harrowing testimonies of a number of contemporary observers, was too emotionally charged. From the late nineteen-eighties onwards, a new generation of historians, following in Woodham-Smith's footsteps, began to question the earlier tendency to exculpate the government. Like the revisionists, post-revisionist historians did not credit Mitchel's charge of genocide, but they insisted that the government could have done much more to alleviate the suffering. They also argued that, by avoiding "emotive" material such as the accounts of contemporary travellers, philanthropists, journalists, doctors, clergymen, and relief officers, revisionist historians failed to convey the human dimension of the tragedy.

In their attempts to find some rational explanation for how the successive potato failures could lead to full-blown famine, historians have pointed up a number of contributing factors such as overpopulation, potato dependence, agricultural backwardness, the land system with its attendant social inequities, and the failure of the government to provide effective and lasting relief. If we are even to begin to understand the "meaning" of the Irish Famine, we do of course need historical explanation, but analytic, explanatory narrative might obscure what are surely the central "realities" of famine, namely starvation, disease, dispossession, and death – in short, all the factors constituting the

traumatic experiences of its victims. In his study of famines in general, David Arnold argues that “the bewilderment and terror caused by famine must be counted among its defining characteristics”, and yet

[i]n their quest for objectivity and reason, or perhaps from an inability to squeeze the tragedy and horror of famine into academically acceptable form, many writers skirt around the grimmest aspects of famine[.] ... Rather too often, possibly recoiling from what they personally find difficult to comprehend or explain, scholars have tried to reduce famine to an exercise in demographic arithmetic or economic logistics, thus imposing their own sense of order and meaning upon the horrific confusion and uncertainty of the famine situation. Statistics have their place; but used alone they obscure as much as they reveal of this ordeal. There comes a point at which the sheer size of famine mortality defies comprehension.⁸

By utilizing contemporary accounts and Famine folklore as part of their source material, post-revisionist historians have conveyed some sense of how famine impacted on the victims, of the hardship they had to endure, and of their bewilderment and terror. Yet as Margaret Kelleher has noted, “a gaping hole persists at the centre of famine source material, namely the testimony of its victims.”⁹ In the absence of this testimony, the difficulty, not to say impossibility, of representing the experiences of the victims in a discourse based on documentary evidence becomes obvious. This problem brings us to the question of whether fictional representations of the Irish Famine can contribute to filling the gap that Kelleher refers to, of whether, as the literary critic Robert Garratt has asked, the novelist “has an advantage over the historian who seeks factual objectivity” when representing a past which “involves trauma or human suffering and emotion.”¹⁰

Garratt concludes that “when the experience one seeks to describe consists, even in part, of human pain and suffering, there may be a role for art to play.”¹¹ In my view, art has a *significant* role to play in the mediation of suffering and trauma. By focusing on a specific (fictional) community and its (fictional) individuals, novelistic representations of the Irish Famine can offer an insight into how famine impacted on different strata of Irish society, how people dealt – or failed to deal – with its consequences, and how its attendant distress and terror affected peoples’ psyche. Paul Ricoeur has argued that “[h]orror ... con-

⁸ David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 17.

⁹ Kelleher, “The Irish Famine: History and Representation”, p. 92.

¹⁰ Robert F. Garratt, “John McGahern’s *Amongst Women*: Representation, Memory, and Trauma”, *Irish University Review*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2005), pp. 121-35 [123].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

stitutes the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims”, and that it is the “quasi-intuitiveness of fiction” which enables the “individuation” of the horrible.¹² In their focus on individual suffering, the novels of Liam O’Flaherty, Walter Macken and Eugene McCabe which make up the other body of texts I examine here invite readers to consider what the experience of famine might have been like for people who, in one way or another, were really affected by the catastrophe. The individuation of the horrible in these novels does not reduce them to mere stories of victimization. While O’Flaherty’s *Famine* (1937), Macken’s *The Silent People* (1962) and McCabe’s *Tales from Poorhouse* (1999) do not belittle the suffering, physical as well as mental, of the lower classes of Irish society that were hit most severely by famine, their depictions of what people did to survive offer an alternative reading to histories and contemporary accounts, which often represent these people as passive sufferers who saw the Famine as a punishment from God in the form of a natural disaster. And in suggesting how political, economic, and social factors contributed to and exacerbated the impact of the famine on the poor, these novels demonstrate that although, in the words of Judith Shklar, “the immediate onset of famine is caused by natural misfortune[,] ... its persistence owes far more to human injustice or folly or both.”¹³

Some critics have argued that the strategy of individuation fails to mediate the enormity of the Irish Famine. According to Derek Hand, the novel as a genre is “[i]n many ways ... simply unsuitable in chronicling the horrific scale of the famine”, and Patrick O’Farrell has argued that “[o]nly the scope of *historical* writing can hope to engage the reader’s committed imagination and sympathy” [original emphasis].¹⁴ But if novelists of the Famine arguably fail to mediate the “horrific scale” of the event as they focus on the local and the domestic, historians who base their interpretations on statistics and documentary evidence might, conversely, fail to represent the experience of the victims. For example, in their attempt to establish the number of deaths due to starvation and famine-related diseases, historians have arrived at an estimate of one million. That is a staggering figure, but on the page of the history book, it is only a *number*. By naming and putting a face on some of the victims, the fictional representation concretizes those deaths in a way that statistics do not, thereby bringing

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 187, 188.

¹³ Judith Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 67-68.

¹⁴ Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 94; Patrick O’Farrell, “Whose Reality? The Irish Famine in History and Literature”, *Historical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 78 (1982), pp. 1-13 [7].

the reader closer to the “realities” of famine. And if, as in the case of revisionist history, “emotive” material is largely avoided, the experience of the victims is further obscured. Luke Dodd has made the pertinent observation that

[a]n understanding of how famine is experienced is fundamental to the understanding of its causes and effects, but this past experience cannot be meaningfully retrieved by historical discourse alone. It requires a methodology which combines the tangible with the intangible.¹⁵

This raises the question of what such a methodology would, or should entail. How can historiography mediate the elusive experience of the famine victims? By incorporating contemporary accounts into their analyses, post-revisionist historians in particular have shed some light on this “intangible” aspect of the Famine. Yet the people who provided these accounts were at a remove from the actual suffering as they had no personal experience of starvation. Their reports, which sometimes bordered on the voyeuristic, aimed at invoking the pity and sympathy of readers. At the same time, some of these observers, perhaps unintentionally, conveyed a sense of repulsion at what they witnessed, and of a certain inability to understand actions (or lack of actions) on the part of the victims. So even if their accounts elicit *sympathy*, they do not necessarily allow for the possibility of *empathy*.¹⁶ Similarly, historical writing that skirts around the grimmest aspects of famine, as David Arnold put it, runs the risk of representing the victims in such a perfunctory way as to cancel out the possibility of empathy.

Starting from the premise that the empathetic imagination is a crucial element in the representation of suffering and trauma, we might then ask whether literature has more potential to enable an affective understanding of the past than history-writing. In Paul Ricoeur’s view, *and* in mine, it does. Writing about the mediating role of fiction, Ricoeur posits that

it is ... the imaginary that keeps otherness from slipping into the unsayable. It is always through some transfer from Same to Other, in empathy and imagination, that the Other that is foreign to me is brought closer.¹⁷

¹⁵ Luke Dodd, “Famine Echoes”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 95, no. 1 (1996), pp. 97-101 [101].

¹⁶ I use the concept of empathy as defined by Dominick LaCapra. Empathy, he proposes, must not be “conflated with identification or fusion with the other; it is opposed to sympathy implying difference from the discrete other who is the object of pity, charity, or condescension[.] ... [E]mpathy should rather be understood in terms of an affective relation, or bond with the other recognized and represented as other.” LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 212-13.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 184.

In Ricoeur's terms, fictional representations of traumatic events (such as the Irish Famine) give "eyes to the horrified narrator", and by extension to the reader, "to see and to weep."¹⁸ Fiction, then, makes possible "the affective relation, or bond with the other" which is conducive to the empathetic imagination and, thereby, to our understanding of the traumatic experiences of past actors. Yet even if fiction is arguably better suited than history-writing to make the experiences of victims "visible" to the reader, it might still fail to communicate the enormous scale of the Famine and/or to account for all the factors that caused and prolonged the catastrophe. By the same token, history-writing might fail to accommodate victims, so that both of these narrative genres may, in themselves, fall short of providing a satisfactory representation of the event. This is where Ricoeur's notion of "the interweaving of history and fiction" and of "the mutual interplay of two narrative genres"¹⁹ becomes highly relevant to our understanding of the past. With reference to the history of victims, he observes that "[e]ither one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims." There is an apparent conflict between the two modes of representation here, but Ricoeur warns that this

must not lead to a ruinous dichotomy between a history that would dissolve the event in explanation and a purely emotional retort that would dispense us from thinking the unthinkable. It is important instead to elevate, each by means of the other, historical explanation and individuation through horror[.] ... [H]istorical explanation and the individuation of events through horror cannot remain mutually antithetical.²⁰

According to the historian Niall O Ciosáin, "the proliferation of approaches to the Famine, and the number of disciplines brought to bear on it, means [*sic*] that there is now no single text which deals adequately with the Famine as a whole."²¹ If no existing text can by itself provide a comprehensive representation of the Famine, we must then look not only to history-writing but also to other forms of discourse in order to grasp the event "as a whole" and to gain some understanding of it. In this quest for knowledge and understanding, the interweaving of history and fiction as outlined by Ricoeur is a key strategy.

My line of enquiry is essentially empirical and text-analytical with a focus on the ethical issues involved in representing the traumatic event of the Great

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 180-92; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 294.

²⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.3, p. 188.

²¹ Niall O Ciosáin, "Was there 'Silence' about the Famine?" *Irish Studies Review*, no. 13 (1995/96), pp. 7-10 [10].

Famine and on the differences between factual and fictional accounts. Rather than developing theory, I am using Ricoeur's concept of the mutual interplay of two narrative genres as a framework for the analyses of my chosen texts. Ricoeur's theoretical insight seems pertinent to my own proposition that, since historians are not free to invent, their accounts might fall short of adequately representing the central experience of the victims who left scant testimony to posterity. But in re-imagining the plight of the afflicted, novels of the Famine give readers a sense of what it was like to be in a situation where millions had to either emigrate, to find some means of survival at home, or to die of starvation and disease.

The chief aim of the present study is to contextualize the twentieth-century novelistic representation of the Irish Famine in terms of the historiographical strands outlined above and to establish to what extent the novels in question reflect or resist the interpretations of the historians. Hence the study is divided into three parts comprising two chapters each, in which I bring historical accounts of the event into dialogue with fictional representations. I analyse Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* in the light of nationalist historiography as represented by Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland*. Although there is a gap of more than seventy years between these two texts, the nationalist interpretation of the Famine was still prevalent when O'Flaherty's novel appeared in 1937. And since O'Flaherty himself was a staunch nationalist, his novel could perhaps be expected to reiterate Mitchel's views. For my reading of Walter Macken's *The Silent People*, my point of historiographical comparison is Edwards and Williams's scholarly collection of revisionist essays entitled *The Great Famine*. Macken wrote his novel at a time when the independent Republic of Ireland was enjoying relative prosperity and when its historians had begun to question the nationalist representation of the past as a story of suffering, deprivation and coercion under British rule. Consequently, his take on the Famine in this novel might well be conditioned by a revisionist historiography which dismisses the nationalist version of the Famine as mere myth. In making comparisons between prose fiction and post-revisionist historiography, finally, I have had to recognize that Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* is less straightforwardly classifiable in terms of the three historiographical strands I refer to, even if her refusal to exculpate the government and her attempts to retrieve the experiences of the victims certainly did anticipate the post-revisionist phase in Famine historiography. That is why I also bring in Kinealy's *This Great Calamity* and Donnelly's *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. On this basis I have no difficulty in posing the question of whether McCabe's novelistic story sequence *Tales from*

the Poorhouse reflects the post-revisionist reading of the Famine which has been dominant since the early nineteen-nineties.

Through close reading of all these texts, I explore how both the historians and the novelists represent major issues such as politics and economics, the Irish land system and its attendant social inequities, the sectarian divide in Irish society, the relief efforts, the question of landlord and government responsibility, and the impact of famine on the victims. In the process, I examine what aspects of the Famine each writer has chosen to include in or exclude from his or her narrative and how this selection and the writers' point of view have shaped the interpretation as a whole. Thus I hope to show that history-writing and prose fiction are not mutually exclusive means of representing and interpreting the Famine, and that the interaction of the two genres allows for a synthesis that enhances our understanding of the, in Ricoeur's words, "incomparably unique" event.²² At the same time (and particularly in my analyses of Mitchel's book and of all three novels), I will consider the matter of what *tone* the writers use and of what bearing this has on literary dialogicality. The historian Ciaran Brady has noted that "all attempts at making sense of, or judgements about, the past are inevitably relative and conditional measures that constantly invite qualification and restatement in the dialogue between writer and reader."²³ But a writer who, consciously or not, allows his or her own views and preferences to dominate the narrative invariably assumes an assertive tone, so that judgements come across as absolute rather than relative and conditional. Consequently, what Roger D. Sell has described as the dialogicality of the relationship between writer and readers²⁴ is endangered as the writer's authoritarian voice threatens to silence any objections readers might have even before they are raised.

A case in point is Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, which I analyse in Chapter 1. Mitchel's interpretation of the Famine is based on his conviction that its causes and consequences were directly attributable to British rule. Mitchel nurtured a deeply rooted and abiding hatred of British imperialism as it was manifested in Ireland. That hatred, intensified by what he saw as pure malevolence in the government's handling of the famine crisis, determines both the style and the tone of his writing. Rather than arguing his case in the light of documentary evidence, he states it with an assertiveness that leaves little or

²² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 188.

²³ Ciaran Brady, "'Constructive and Instrumental': The Dilemma of Ireland's first 'New Historians'", in idem. (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), pp. 3-31 [31].

²⁴ Roger D. Sell, *Communicational Criticism: Studies in Literature as Dialogue* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), pp. 9-25.

no room for dispassionate evaluation or divergent opinions and conclusions. The result is a fierce polemic that is much more like a political pamphlet than history. In Mitchel's view, the government's economic policies led to "starvation amidst plenty", made a mockery of famine relief, and supported a "diabolical scheme" to exterminate the "surplus population" of Ireland. In the effort to prove his case, Mitchel politicizes the Famine to such an extent that he risks losing sight of the victims. Although he occasionally describes them in terms that reveal the devastating impact of the famine on their lives, the focus of these descriptions tends to shift from the afflicted people to those he perceives as responsible for their misery, that is, the British government. As far as Mitchel was concerned, their genocidal intent was obvious. Yet while Mitchel's whole analysis might raise many questions and objections, I do not think that he should be dismissed as just a rancorous polemicist. His indictment of the government, no matter how far-fetched and misguided it may seem to us today, was not merely the product of hatred, but involved a genuine moral feeling which stemmed from a profound sense of injustice. As such, it appealed to Irish nationalists both at home and abroad, and later nationalist writings on the Famine were substantially informed by Mitchel's interpretation. So the second part of Chapter 1 gives an overview of this literature from Canon John O'Rourke's *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847* (1875) to P.S. O'Hegarty's *A History of Ireland under the Union* (1952). And I end the chapter with a brief discussion of how providential thinking within the government and British perceptions of the Irish character impacted on the relief efforts, in a way which might only have confirmed Mitchel in his views.

Chapter 2 deals with Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine*, which is set in the fictive rural community of Crom in County Galway on the western seaboard. The story revolves around the Kilmartin family and their neighbours who eke out a living on their small plots of land in Black Valley. O'Flaherty's description of the struggle of his characters to survive against overwhelming odds during the initial stages of the Famine lays bare the awful realities of famine: starvation, disease, madness, cannibalism, infanticide, and death. In the attempt to explain why the potato failure led to a devastating famine, O'Flaherty faces the challenge of what, in the words of Margaret Kelleher, confronts all the novelists of famine: "the difficulties of integrating historical explanation within the famine story."²⁵ My analysis of the novel explores how O'Flaherty meets this challenge, to what extent his interpretation reiterates or diverges from the na-

²⁵ Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 137.

tionalist interpretation as expounded by Mitchel, and whether or not the tone he employs in accounting for the causes and consequences of the Famine conveys the kind of non-coerciveness that allows for a genuine dialogue between writer and reader.

Chapter 3 starts with a brief outline of the “revisionist turn” in Irish historiography as it was conceptualized by “new historians” such as T.W. Moody, R.D. Edwards and F.S.L. Lyons. The chief aim of these historians was to debunk what they regarded as the myths of nationalist history by striving for objectivity and judiciousness, by eschewing polemics, and by subjecting passion to reason. The second part of this chapter examines the more particular implications of the revisionist project for the history of the Famine. This part includes a number of contemporary accounts and opinions which suggest that, in spite of its putative shortcomings, the nationalist interpretation of the event was not necessarily a myth based on unsustainable facts and a purely emotive response. In the last part of the chapter, I examine Edwards and Williams’s *The Great Famine*, a collection of essays that broke the long virtual silence on the subject. Although the book received mostly favourable reviews at the time, post-revisionist historians have criticized it for, among other things, being too apologetic in its assessment of government culpability and for downplaying the human suffering. My own analysis of this volume discusses to what extent such criticisms are justified.

Chapter 4 deals with Walter Macken’s *The Silent People* which, like O’Flaherty’s novel, is set in the west of Ireland. Its time frame spans a period from 1826 to the early autumn of 1847, incorporating subjects such as pre-Famine poverty, agrarian unrest and violence, and the campaign for Catholic emancipation. In this chapter, I consider in what respects, if any, Macken’s novel is a revisionist work, how the author represents the experiences of the victims, and whether he manages to avoid the assertive tone that characterizes Mitchel’s text.

In Chapter 5, I analyse Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger*, Kinealy’s *This Great Calamity*, and Donnelly’s *The Great Irish Potato Famine* with a view to establishing what aspects of these works serve as correctives to the nationalist and revisionist interpretations of the Famine. Given the post-revisionist critique of revisionist historians which accuses them of, among other things, filtering out the trauma and exculpating the government on the assumption that, under the circumstances, they could have done no more to alleviate the consequences of the successive potato blights, I pay particular attention to how Woodham-Smith, Kinealy, and Donnelly handle the question of government responsibility, and to how they go about mediating the impact of famine on the victims.

The final chapter discusses Eugene McCabe's *Tales from the Poorhouse* which, as I hope to show, is a unique take on the Famine in more ways than one, and as regards both content and form. It consists of four stories told by characters from different strata of Irish society, but each of their stories interact with the others to form a whole which reads like a novel. Set in Ulster, McCabe's story sequence fills a gap in the historical record. Of the five histories I examine here, only Kinealy's *This Great Calamity* touches on the Famine in this part of the country. And in contrast to O'Flaherty and Macken, McCabe opts for first-person narratives. This essentially precludes authorial intrusions that could come across as a polemical and coercive threat to the dialogic writer/reader relationship. As I see it, in only 114 pages of text, *Tales from the Poorhouse* tells us more about the tragic consequences of the Famine than either the much longer novels of O'Flaherty and Macken or any of the histories considered here.

PART I

1. NATIONALIST REPRESENTATIONS OF FAMINE HISTORY

1.1. John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*

County Cork, December 1846:

"The same morning the police opened a house ... which was observed shut for many days, and two frozen corpses were found lying upon the mud floor, *half devoured by the rats*[.] ... A mother, herself in fever, was seen the same day to drag out the corpse of her child, a girl about twelve, perfectly naked, and leave it half covered with stones[.] ... In another house ... the dispensary doctor found seven wretches lying, unable to move, under the same cloak – *one had been dead many hours, but the others were unable to move either themselves or the corpse*." [original emphasis]

Nicholas Marshall Cummins¹

Mohill Union workhouse, County Leitrim, December 1847:

"The buildings we found most dilapidated, and fast advancing to ruin; everything out of repair; the yards undrained, and filled, in common with the cesspools, by accumulations of filth – a violation of all sanatory [*sic*] requirements: fever and dysentery prevailing throughout the house, every ward filthy to a most noisome degree, and evolving offensive effluvia; the paupers defectively clothed, and many of those recently admitted continuing in their own rags and impurity; ... the dietary not adhered to, and the food given in a half-cooked state – most inadequate, particularly for the sick; ... [the] neglected state [of the children] painfully exhibited by their diseased and emaciated aspect; no means for the proper treatment of the sick, ... coffins unused in the interment of the dead."

Vice-Guardians of Mohill Union²

County Sligo, March 1847:

"The first place I visited was a wretched hamlet of three cottages[.] ... The children were bloated in their faces and their bodies, their limbs withered to bones and sinews, with rags on them[.] ... They had been found that day, gnawing the flesh from the bones of a pig which had died in an out-house[.] ... [T]he people are dying from starvation by dozens daily[.] ... Many cannot crawl to the public works, much less do anything when there[.] ... In the neighbour-

¹ Quoted in W.P. O'Brien, *The Great Famine in Ireland and a Retrospect of the Fifty Years 1845-95* (London: Downey & Co., 1896), pp. 79-80.

² *Papers Relating to Proceedings for the Relief of the Distress, and State of the Unions and Workhouses in Ireland, Fourth Series* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1847), p. 230.

hood of the poorhouse they come to die in order that they may have a decent burial. Typhus fever and dysentery have added to their horrors.”

Captain O'Brien³

County Roscommon, April 1848:

“He was 16 years old and was not included in the class entitled to relief[.] ... He came once to the workhouse but found no vacancy. On 31 March he received outdoor relief, although not strictly entitled to it; he received 7 lbs of meal on 8 April ... and is reported to have fallen on his way home.”

“Mary Moran ... had possession of two acres of land and would not give them up. She was offered relief on condition of so doing but declined. She died of absolute want.”

Boyle Poor Law Guardians⁴

County Clare, December 1849:

“Here, at Tullig, and other places, the ruthless destroyer ... has left the walls of the houses standing, while he has unroofed them and taken away all the shelter from the people. They look like the tomb of a departed race ... and I felt actually relieved at seeing one or two half-clad spectres gliding about, as an evidence that I was not in the land of the dead[.] ... Sixteen thousand and odd persons unhoused in the Union of Kilrush before the month of June in the present year[.] ... One beholds only shrunk frames scarcely covered with flesh – crawling skeletons, who appear to have risen from their graves, and are ready to return frightened to that abode.”

James Mahony⁵



The village of Tullig, *Illustrated London News*, 15 December 1849

³ Liam Swords, *In Their Own Words: The Famine in North Connacht 1845-49* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), pp. 147-48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 309, 311

⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 15 December 1849.

Contemporary accounts of the Famine years were filled with descriptions of the sufferings of the poor such as the above, supplied by charity workers, relief officers, journalists, doctors and clergymen. The response they elicited, particularly outside Ireland among people who did not witness the havoc wrought by famine at first hand, was often one of disbelief. Could such horrors really be credited, or were the accounts exaggerated? In retrospect, this response may seem unwarranted and callous, but a modern reader unfamiliar with the events of those years is just as likely to experience a similar sense of incredulity. Indeed, eyewitnesses who reported in writing on what they had observed were themselves aware of the possibility that their accounts would be received with disbelief. Many of them agonized over a perceived inability to mediate the sense of a reality so horrendous as to be “inexpressible.” Phrases such as “language utterly fails me” and “no words can describe such scenes” occurred frequently in their texts. In his report of the six weeks he spent observing the spread of famine in 1847, William Bennett of the Society of Friends, the charitable organization that did much to alleviate the suffering, gives the impression that he has despaired of ever being able to convey his experiences of that period in writing:

To describe properly the state of things in some of these wretched districts, is a vain attempt. It is impossible, – it is inconceivable. STARVATION, – a word that has now become so familiar as scarcely to awaken a painful idea, – is NOT being two or three days deficient of food. *It is something quite different*; and the effects of dwindling and insufficient nourishment upon a whole population[,] ... the disease, the emaciation, – the despair, – the extinction of everything human beyond it, – are utterly past the powers of description, or even of imagination, without witnessing. I am in possession of details beyond anything that has appeared in print[,] ... in fact, for the sake of poor humanity, unfit to communicate. My mind was at times so struck down, that for days together the pen has refused its office; the appalling spectacles have seemed to float between, whenever I attempted it, and to paralyze every effort. [original emphasis] ⁶

This passage appears towards the end of Bennett’s account, when he has already filled over one hundred pages with descriptions of “the state of things” in the places he has visited. He claims that he has not done this “properly”, that is, in such a way as to re-create reality exactly as he saw it. Still, he manages to express the “inexpressible” adequately enough to convey a sense of the enormous suffering of the victims. So do many other eyewitness accounts, thereby serving an

⁶ William Bennett, *Narrative of a Recent Journey of Six Weeks in Ireland* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), pp. 132-33.

important function. They are invaluable in that they provide us with a certain knowledge, however indirect, about the situation of the sufferers. Their tendency to individualize the suffering (although mostly stopping short of actually naming victims) has the effect of making it tangible and of providing the victims of the disaster with a place in its history. But can such “knowledge”, based as it is on subjective observation, be trusted? What about the charge of exaggeration? Even if some accounts probably were exaggerated, especially in cases where the writers were motivated by political considerations, I see no reason to doubt the integrity of people like William Bennett. Most of them were engaged in the relief efforts, and their main concerns were humanitarian, not political.

This is not to say that commentators like Bennett avoided political issues, particularly in regard to the ways they reflected on social conditions in nineteenth-century Ireland. Bennett himself ascribed the miserable state of the peasant population to “unjust and partial legislation” and to “the remnants of the hereditary and inveterate selfishness of the old feudal times.”⁷ Many of his colleagues in the Society of Friends concurred with him, criticizing the government’s continued refusal to interfere in Irish land politics and what they perceived as the negligence and callousness of many landlords. As they saw it, the land system produced and perpetuated mass poverty by allowing, and often even encouraging, subdivision and subletting. The most dire consequence of this practice was that the small farmers, the cottier tenants and the holders of conacre, who constituted the majority of Irish cultivators, farmed for a mere subsistence and were dependent on the potato, were additionally burdened by high rents.⁸ Another factor contributing to the perpetuation of poverty was that these tenants held no security of tenure, and any improvements they might make on their small holdings were considered to be part of the soil. Thus they were disinclined to improve since they knew that, in consequence, the rent was likely to be raised. In case of eviction, the tenant would receive no compensation for any improvement he had undertaken. While Jonathan Pim, Bennett

⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

⁸ A cottier was a tenant-at-will, holding a small plot of land and a cabin which he paid for either in cash or by labouring for his immediate landlord. The rent ranged from £1.10s. to £2 a year. The plot of land was rarely large enough to provide a family, their pig and fowl with potatoes for a whole year. The conacre system consisted in selling the use of a portion of land for one or more crops. Conacre land was manured and made ready for the seed before letting, but the tenant himself had to provide the seed. The rent, paid in cash, was as high as £4 per acre, and up to £10 or £12 in the vicinity of towns. See E.R.R. Green, “Agriculture”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine* [1956] (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994), pp. 92-95; James S. Donnelly, *Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1975), pp. 11-13.

and James Hack Tuke all deplored the lack of improvements in agriculture, they also expressed the conviction that the impoverished tenants could not be held responsible. "It is not surprising", wrote Pim,

that the Irish farmer, without the requisite farm buildings, without any adequate motive to effect improvements, and without the power of making any valid agreement which might induce him to do so, should have hitherto made little progress in agriculture."⁹

Bennett asserted that "should there be any visible improvement, down comes the landlord or his agent, with a demand for rent", adding that "[t]he moral effect of such a state of things is obvious to the least reflecting mind."¹⁰ Similarly, Tuke observed that "[t]he bad cultivation of the little holdings of the farmer may be in no inconsiderable degree attributed to his want of confidence in reaping the fruits of improved cultivation."¹¹

In spite of their criticism of the land system and their serious objections to government relief measures, suggesting that these were inadequate and badly administered, the Society of Friends did not explicitly blame Westminster for the miserable state into which the country fell as a result of famine. But a few Quakers did recognize the possibility that Ireland's colonial status had contributed to her economic, social and political degradation, and this recognition denoted an implicit critique of the colonial power, Britain. While expressing regret at the prediction that the Irish would not survive in 1847 without "English aid", William Forster held that "this grievous burden on our resources" must be accepted "in return for long centuries of neglect and oppression."¹² Forster did not elaborate on the nature of that oppression, but William Bennett was more specific. He argued that Ireland was degraded because she had been treated "as a captive slave won by the force of arms" and "kept by coercion" in the position of "a conquered province." This state of affairs was, according to Bennett, not compatible with the terms of the Act of Union, since Ireland obviously was not placed on an "equal footing with England" and thus could not be considered "an integral part of the same empire."¹³ Several other contemporaries expressed similar opinions. Elizabeth Smith, the Scottish wife of a Protestant landowner

⁹ Central Relief Committee, *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland, in 1846 and 1847* [1852] (Dublin: Edmund Burke, 1996), p. 119. Hereafter referred to as *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹¹ James Hack Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1848), p. 49.

¹² *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 157

¹³ Bennett, *Narrative*, p. 145.

in County Wicklow, kept a diary during the years of famine. She, too, criticized most of the government relief schemes, and her diary entries from 1847 onward reflect her growing dissatisfaction with the government's Irish policy as a whole. "That the country is ill ruled, much oppressed, not attended to, unjustly taxed, none of us can deny", she wrote in May 1848. Only a few months later, she had occasion to question the rationality of the Union:

They talk of equalising the poor rates, making all Ireland pay for all Ireland. Why not all England too? If they won't help us let them leave us alone, let us manage ourselves. It will have to come to that. I think so - I that used to laugh, to scorn the word repeal. They use us so abominably.¹⁴

Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association, founded in 1840, gained an enormous amount of support during the pre-Famine years, mainly from the Irish middle and lower classes. Big landowners in general, and the Protestant contingent in particular, did not see much sense in supporting such a cause.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Mrs Smith's misgivings about the Union and its economic aspects in relation to famine relief were shared by many of her upper class contemporaries, English as well as Irish. For example, William Smith, an officer of the Board of Works, which organized relief work in 1846-47, held that "England has too long treated all her colonies and possessions as mere dependencies, and not ... as part and parcel of the great whole."¹⁶ Archbishop John MacHale conceded that the famine was not a direct consequence of the Union, but he asserted that it would have been less severe "if Ireland had not been rendered too feeble to cope with the calamity by the emaciating process to which it had been previously subjected."¹⁷ As he saw it, Ireland had filled the function of England's granary during all the years of the Union and had consequently been drained of her resources and left dependent on the potato. To take another example, the Protestant barrister and politician Isaac Butt was a fervent supporter of the Union, but his faith in it was deeply shaken by the events of the Famine. In an article published in *The Dublin University Magazine*, an essentially conservative journal of which Butt was a founder and former editor, he raised some serious

¹⁴ David Thomson and Moyra McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith, 1840-1850* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 186, 199.

¹⁵ Protestant Repeal Associations were founded in Dublin and Belfast in 1848. They gained some support from tradesmen and professionals, but working-class Protestants and the landlord class showed scant interest in repeal.

¹⁶ William H. Smith, *A Twelve Months' Residence in Ireland during the Famine and the Public Work, 1846 and 1847* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1848), p. 98.

¹⁷ Quoted in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 1

questions about the economic implications of the Union for famine-stricken Ireland:

What can be more absurd – what can be more wicked, than for men professing attachment to an imperial constitution to answer claims now put forward for state assistance to the unprecedented necessities of Ireland, by talking of Ireland being a drain upon the *English* treasury? ... If the Union be not a mockery, there exists no such thing as an English treasury. The exchequer is the exchequer of the United Kingdom. Its separation into provincial departments is never thought of when imperial resources are to be spent, or imperial credit pledged, for objects principally or exclusively of interest to the English people. Ireland has been deprived, by the Union with England, of all separate power of action[.] ... If, bearing our share of all imperial burdens – when calamity falls upon us [are] we to be told that we then recover our separate existence as a nation, just so far as to disentitle us to the state assistance which any portion of a nation, visited with such a calamity, had a right to expect from the governing power? If Cornwall had been visited with the scenes that have desolated Cork, would similar arguments have been used? [original emphasis] ¹⁸

With the introduction of the Rate-in-Aid bill, which was passed in May 1849, the integrity of the Union became a matter of debate also in Parliament. The bill stipulated that the more prosperous Poor Law unions in Ireland would be responsible for making up the financial deficit of the insolvent unions in the west. This meant that, in addition to the local poor rates, the country would be burdened with another, national tax. At the same time, the Imperial Treasury would be relieved of all obligations to provide further financial assistance to Ireland. Predictably, most Irish MPs and those who held a vested interest in the country found the scheme highly objectionable, not least because it would place the whole burden of relief on Ireland alone. Thus it seemed that the rate-in-aid violated the Act of Union, since it denied the responsibility of *all* parts of the United Kingdom to aid another part in distress. The radical MP William Sharman Crawford argued that, by sidestepping Imperial responsibility for famine relief, the bill stood in violation of the Constitution:

It is unconstitutional and unjust to impose on Ireland separate national taxation for the wants of particular localities, so long as the public general revenue of Ireland is paid into an Imperial Treasury and placed at the disposal of an Imperial Legislature for the general purpose of the United Kingdom. ¹⁹

¹⁸ Isaac Butt, “The Famine in the Land. What has been done, and what is to be done” [1847], partly rpt. in Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2, pp. 161-165 [164, 165].

¹⁹ Quoted in Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 258.

The Treasury, arguably the ultimate arbiter of government relief expenditure, refuted such accusations, holding fast to the principle that Irish property must pay for Irish poverty. "There can be no doubt", wrote Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, "that the deplorable consequences of this great calamity extended to the Empire at large, but the disease was strictly local, and the cure was to be obtained only by the application of local remedies."²⁰

The ambivalent attitude to Irish relief which prevailed throughout the Famine years can be illustrated by the example of John Russell, Whig MP and, in 1845, Prime Minister-to-be. After the first appearance of the potato blight, and while the Whigs were still in opposition, he asserted that "the Union was but a parchment and an insubstantial union, if Ireland is not to be treated, in the hour of difficulty and distress, as an integral part of the United Kingdom."²¹ In view of his subsequent vacillation and indecision on the matter of relief for Ireland, Russell the man was probably being sincere when he made that assertion. But Russell the Prime Minister found himself caught between humanitarian concerns and the "necessities" of political economy, unable to steer a satisfactory middle course. Edward Twisleton, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner for Ireland from 1847 to 1849, aptly pinpointed the dilemma:

It is wished that the Irish should not come upon the national finances for the relief of their destitute. It is also wished that deaths from starvation should not take place. But these wishes are as unreasonable as if you ask us to make beer without malt, or to fly without wings.²²

Of all the principal relief officers, Twisleton eventually became the most outspoken critic of the government, and he grew increasingly sceptical about the manner in which the famine crisis was handled. By 1848, he was convinced that the government's relief policies were untenable and that they would cause no end of resentment in Ireland.

1.1.1. Blaming the British government

Twisleton's conviction was shared and confirmed by an Irishman who had no scruples about expressing his condemnation of the government in the most rancorous terms. That man was John Mitchel (1815-1875), barrister, journalist, revolutionary and self-styled historian. His attacks on British rule and British policy in famine Ireland featured prominently in the pages of the *Nation*, the newspaper of the Young Ireland movement, and in his own *United Irishman* in

²⁰ Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* [1848] (London: Macmillan, 1880), pp. 78-79.

²¹ Quoted in Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 69.

²² Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 213.

the course of its brief existence.²³ His antipathies were further elaborated in *Jail Journal* (1854), initiated on board a ship destined for Bermuda, where he found himself after being arrested under the Treason Felony Act, convicted, and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation in May 1848. Finally, his views found their fullest and most venomous expression in *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1861), which he wrote in exile in America, having escaped from the prison colony in 1853. As Mitchel saw it, the government's famine policy was not simply untenable; it was a contrivance for slaughter, a machinery deliberately devised and implemented to destroy the Irish people. The Famine, he claimed, provided England with one more opportunity to effect the final conquest of Ireland, a conquest which had been attempted at different stages, with devastating consequences for Ireland but with no decisive outcome, from the time of Elizabeth I through the Cromwellian campaign and the implementation of the Penal Laws up to the Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. Frightened by the "provoked" rebellion of 1798 and prompted by English bribery, Mitchel explained, the Irish were enticed to accept the Union, and "Ireland, and all Irish produce and industry, were placed totally in [England's] power; and Ireland having but one member in six to [*sic*] what they called the Imperial Parliament, security was taken that the arrangement should never be disturbed."²⁴ Mitchel saw no benefits whatsoever accruing to Ireland from the Union, and the consequences of the Famine seemed to him the ultimate indication of its failure. *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, aimed primarily at an American readership, opens with a comment on Ireland's status within the British Empire:

That an island which is said to be an integral part of the richest empire on the globe - and the most fertile portion of that empire; ... should in five years lose two and a half millions of its people (more than one fourth) by hunger, and fever the consequence of hunger, and flight beyond sea to escape hunger, - while that empire of which it is said to be a part, was all the while advancing in wealth, prosperity, and comfort, at a faster pace than ever before, - is a matter that seems to ask elucidation.²⁵

Mitchel proposes to explain this perplexing state of affairs, along with other "anomalous" circumstances connected with it which, he says, "must be not only

²³ The *Nation* was a weekly newspaper founded in 1842 to promote O'Connell's campaign for repeal of the Union. In 1845, Mitchel succeeded Thomas Davis as political leader writer. Mitchel founded the *United Irishman* in February 1848, and the paper was suppressed in May the same year.

²⁴ John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* [1854] (Shannon: University Press of Ireland, 1982), p. xliii.

²⁵ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* [1861] (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, n.d.), p. 8. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

asserted but proved beyond doubt”, by offering his readers “a plain narrative of events” (8-9).

In the course of that narrative, assertion takes precedence over proof. Mitchel does not set out to *argue* his case but to *state* it in such a way as to leave no room for counter-argument. Elsewhere in his writings, he admits that this is his *modus operandi*: “It is all assertion. I declaim vehemently; I dogmatise vigorously, but argue never. You have my thought. I don’t want you to agree with me; you can take it or leave it.”²⁶ But he also points out that his narrative will draw on certain “authorities” who might corroborate his assertions and truth-claims. Some of the statistics and “facts” he presents can indeed be verified, while he interprets and subverts others to fit his own agenda. Facts in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* are relevant only insofar as they can be incorporated into Mitchel’s story to support his pre-determined notion of a government conspiracy, realized by means of the relief schemes, to exterminate the Irish peasantry. Having invoked some “proper” channels of reference, he considers himself at liberty to refer to his “own personal knowledge” as a reliable source of information. In doing this, he obviously relies on the sense of authenticity which an eyewitness account can evoke in readers. And if anyone should still be inclined to disbelieve him, the experiences of those who were forced by famine to seek refuge overseas will serve to substantiate his truth-claims:

There are in these United States, this moment, at least one million of persons, each of whom knows the truth of every word I have written, and could add to my general statement, circumstances of horror and atrocity, that might make one tremble with rage as he reads. (67)

Yet at the same time, he takes care to assure his audience that he

approach[es] the details of these “Relief Acts” with great deliberation and caution. They have always appeared to me a machinery for the destruction of an enemy more fatal, by far, than batteries of grape-shot, chain-shot, shells, and rockets: but many persons who pass for intelligent, even in Ireland, do believe that they were in some sort measures of *Relief*, not contrivances for slaughter. [original emphasis] (102)

Mitchel would have us believe that although he is offering his personal interpretation of the effects of government policies, it is not based on idle speculation or rash judgement. This attempt to gain our confidence is followed by the more manipulative, almost intimidating insinuation that no intelligent person could possibly discern any goodwill behind the relief measures. Mitchel plays on his readers’ self-esteem: if we fail to recognize the validity of his interpre-

²⁶ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. 88.

tation, we are stupid. The immediate effect of his insistent assertiveness and ruthless manipulation, in evidence throughout *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, is that the sympathetic reader is liable to capitulate to Mitchel's interpretation. Thomas Flanagan has suggested that

the reader finds himself thinking ... surely this intricate machinery of inefficient relief, these proliferating committees and commissions which produce nothing save lists of the dead and the starving, could not have issued from a whole-hearted desire to keep the Irish people alive however great the expense to British trade and the British treasury? ²⁷

This effect is exactly what Mitchel was aiming for. His professed concern with reliable "authorities", with "deliberation and caution", is perfunctory. It is the force of his rhetoric, fuelled by his outrage at injustice, which constitutes the persuasive power of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, not empirical evidence.

Dominating Mitchel's narrative is his vision of England relentlessly abusing Ireland, even in the midst of famine, and he never lets his readers lose sight of it. The style he employs to embody that vision is driven by an all-consuming hatred of British rule in Ireland, a rule which he sees as representative of oppression, injustice and subjugation:

[T]o describe how the spirit of the country has been broken and subdued by beggarly famine; - how her national aspirations have been, not choked in her own blood, nobly shed on the field, but strangled by red tape; - how her life and soul have been ameliorated and civilized out of her; - how she died of political economy, and was buried under tons of official stationery; - this is a dreary task, which I wish some one else had undertaken. (139)

This passage is in effect a comprehensive statement of Mitchel's (and, implicitly, Ireland's) grievances. The Famine was "beggarly" because Ireland had been plundered of what was rightfully hers. Mitchel finds it galling that "the plunderers" then had the audacity to "send a small pittance of it back to us in the form of alms" (133). In the parlance of the British, ameliorating the condition of Ireland meant getting rid of her "surplus population", and civilizing her people consisted above all in curing them of their perceived barbarity and rebelliousness by coercion. In Mitchel's interpretation of British intent, the Famine provided favourable conditions for advancing both of these objectives. Starvation, disease and emigration eliminated the "surplus" problem. By the same token, the spirit of resistance was considerably weakened, and whatever seditious elements were left could then easily be crushed. "[I]t was quite evident", Mitchel writes in his characteristic ironic

²⁷ Thomas Flanagan, "Critical Introduction", in Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, pp. vii-xxxv [xxxi].

mode, “that an Irish famine could not be administered without martial law and a sharp look out after arms and ‘suspicious persons.’”²⁸ The “contrivances for slaughter”, as Mitchel terms the relief measures, owed their deadly effect to the “strict adherence to the principles of political economy” and to the fact that the administration of famine relief was effectually made “a government concern.”

Mitchel argued that “English professors of political economy” had perverted and misapplied its principles and attempted to prove that

to part with our bread and cattle is profitable “commerce”, and that our trading intercourse with their country enriches us immensely, whatever the ignorant and starving Irish may say and feel to the contrary.²⁹

He was not alone in his censure of “English” political economy; many of his contemporaries who were neither Irish nor nationalists shared his views on the matter. As Thomas Boylan and Timothy Foley have pointed out,

[d]uring and after the Famine the laws of political economy (by which was usually meant the policy of *laissez-faire*, seen as an intrinsic part of the science) were attacked for being abstract, unhistorical, and for being misapplied in Ireland, and as not applying to Ireland’s anomalous general condition or to the specific circumstances of the famine period.³⁰

Advocates of the discipline, on the other hand, insisted on the necessity of adhering to its principles if Ireland was to be cured. Their reasoning, according to Boylan and Foley, was that

[t]he Famine crisis made it all the more important that the principles of political economy should be applied to Ireland. Any relaxation, however nobly motivated, was a ‘killing kindness’[.] ... In a pervasive, and conveniently naturalising, metaphor, Ireland was figured as a diseased body, in need of the strong, even harsh medicine of political economy, which was seen as all the more effective for being unpalatable[.] ... A powerful dose of *laissez-faire* was the universal panacea for Irish ills, in opposition to those who clamoured for more lenient treatment for Ireland, either because of her generally perceived ‘anomalous’ position or because of the exceptional circumstances of the Famine.³¹

²⁸ John Mitchel, *An Apology for the British Government in Ireland* [1860] (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1920), p. 32.

²⁹ Irish Confederation (John Mitchel, ed.), *Irish Political Economy* (Dublin: William Holden, 1847), p. iv.

³⁰ Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 136.

³¹ Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, “A Nation Perishing of Political Economy?”, in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), pp. 138-50 [142-43].

One of the most fundamental “saving doctrines” of political economy, and the one that did the most damage when applied in famine Ireland, Mitchel explains, was that “there must be no interference with the natural course of trade”:

It was seen that this maxim would ensure the transfer of the Irish wheat and beef to England; for that was what they called the natural course of trade. Moreover, this maxim would forbid the government or relief committees to sell provisions in Ireland any lower than the market price; for this is an interference with the enterprise of private speculators; it would forbid the employment of government ships; for this troubles individual ship-owners; and, lastly, it was found (this invaluable maxim) to require that the public works to be executed by labourers employed with borrowed public money should be unproductive works; that is, works which would create no fund to pay their own expenses. (107)

He perceived an intolerable anomaly in the application of the principle of free trade in famine-stricken Ireland. In *The Last Conquest of Ireland* as well as in his other writings on the Famine, he repeatedly flogs his hobby-horse, exports, declaring that if they had been prohibited, there would have been no famine in the country. He bases this claim on the conviction that Ireland produced more than enough food to sustain her own people. But even during the worst years of the Famine, he explains, “Ireland was exporting to England food to the value of fifteen million pounds sterling.” Thus the English were well fed while the Irish starved, in spite of the fact that “Ireland had on her own soil at each harvest good and ample provisions for double her own population, notwithstanding the potato blight.”³²

While intermittently referring to the value and volume of Irish exports, Mitchel also conjures up the image of the English harpy feeding off the starving Irish. “One would not grudge the English labourer his dinner”, he remarks,

and I refer to his excellent table only to remark that during those same three years exactly as fast as the English people and working classes advanced to luxury, the Irish people and working classes sank to starvation: and further, that the Irish people were still sowing and reaping what they of the sister island so contentedly devoured to the value of at least 17,000,000 sterling[.]... For every Englishman who added to his domestic expenditure by a pudding thrice a week, an Irishman had to retrench *his* to cabbage-leaves and turnip-tops. As dyspepsia creeps into England, dysentery ravages Ireland; and the exact correlative of a Sunday dinner in England is coroner’s inquest in Ireland. [original emphasis] (124-25)

³² Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. xlix.

I see this as an attempt to draw readers' attention away from the often questionable statistics presented in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* (which Mitchel nevertheless seems to have felt he had to include in the effort to sustain his truth-claims) and, instead, focus it on the juxtaposition of well-being and want. For example, with reference to one week in May of 1847 he notes:

During the same week the poor-house, hospitals, gaols ... were overflowing with starving wretches; and fevered patients were occupying the same bed with famished corpses: but on every day of the same week large cargoes of grain and cattle were leaving every port for England. (191)

When this idea that the prohibition of exports could have saved the Irish from starvation if English ideology and greed had not prevented it is added to that of the "contrivances for slaughter", that is, the relief measures, the genocidal intent of the British government becomes perfectly clear, at least to Mitchel's mind:

When the Irish nation, then [in 1845] being nine millions, produced by their own industry on their own land good food enough to feed eighteen millions, one cannot well say that *Providence* sent them a famine; and when those nine millions dwindle in two or three years to six and a half millions, partly by mere hunger, and partly by flight beyond sea to escape it; and when we find all these same years the English people living well and feeding full, upon that very food for want of which the Irish died; I suppose the term British Famine will be admitted to be quite correct. [original emphasis] ³³

In spite of a possible initial reaction to *The Last Conquest of Ireland* such as that of Thomas Flanagan, the sceptical reader can hardly avoid recognizing the contrived nature of Mitchel's thesis as expounded in that text as well as in his other writings. In order to sustain the notion of England as the cause of all of Ireland's misfortunes and miseries, and the attendant contention that the relief measures constituted a series of strategies to exterminate the Irish people, Mitchel has to resort to a number of negative distortions, that is, the exclusion of certain facts and the manipulation of others, such as his reduction of political economy to a simple excuse for extermination. British policy in general is subjected to ironic inversions in order to show the absurdity of the notion that it could ever benefit Ireland in any way. Moreover, he subverts what might be seen as positive aspects in some relief measures so as to make every bit of "evidence" fit into the framework of his premise. Employing to the full his sardonic wit and his aptitude for satire, which often spills over into black comedy, Mitchel nevertheless makes it difficult, at least for me, to ward off the effects of the verbal eloquence with which he serves up his story. Even though, with

³³ Mitchel, *An Apology*, pp. 6-7.

hindsight, the charge of genocide might be unacceptable to the modern reader, there is a strange logic in much of his reasoning and a genuine sense of injustice which are hard to refute. As Hayden White has remarked, “the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” [original emphasis].³⁴

It would seem that Mitchel was well aware of this. In *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, his aim is clearly to persuade readers that British intentions towards Ireland were malevolent and, at the same time, to elicit sympathy for the suffering Irish. In view of its unashamed subjectivity, its failure (at least partially) to provide verifiable facts, and its ideological orientation bordering on political propaganda, it is hardly surprising that his interpretation was dismissed by revisionist historians. But then Mitchel was not a professional historian, and his account of the Famine was written in direct response to a situation to which he himself was witness. As one of his biographers has put it, “[h]is opinions are sentiments, and cannot be otherwise: they are the result not of a calm and reasoned contemplation of Irish affairs, but of the impression which certain facts, to wit, the famine ... produced on his imagination.”³⁵ Does this mean, then, that *The Last Conquest of Ireland* should be relegated to the realm which the historian F.S.L. Lyons refers to as “false history”? I think not, for the simple reason that it reflects so much of contemporary opinion, and also because it echoes previous writings on the Irish question by influential figures like Jonathan Swift, William Cobbett and Thomas Carlyle. And the works of the contemporary literati, from the poets of the *Nation*, including James Clarence Mangan, to the novelist William Carleton, reveal sentiments similar to those expressed in Mitchel’s writing. As I see it, Mitchel should be read within this context, and with particular attention to contemporary accounts of the Famine, in order to gain perspective and to see how his “facts” could have made sense then, and how they might to some extent make sense even today. Melissa Fegan has remarked that “exports and genocide have remained part of the discourse of the Famine long after they have proved to be historically irrelevant.”³⁶ The notions of genocide and of exports as a factor exacerbating famine might be refuted because they have been found to lack foundation in historical fact, but

³⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* [1978] (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 91.

³⁵ Emile Montégut, *John Mitchel: a study of Irish nationalism* (Dublin and London: Maunsell & Co., 1915), p. 27.

³⁶ Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845-1919* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 24.

it does not follow that they are “historically irrelevant.” On the contrary, since these ideas had enough contemporary currency (the former less so than the latter) to become part of the historical consciousness and the historical record of the time, they are highly relevant to the analysis of Famine discourse.

1.1.2. ‘Surplus population’ and ‘surplus produce’

From the mid-eighteenth century onward, Ireland saw a rapid increase in population. By 1800, the number was around five million, rising to seven million in 1821, and peaking at eight and a half million in 1845.³⁷ Population growth and increasing poverty appeared to go hand in hand. Travellers in pre-Famine Ireland frequently commented on the extreme poverty they witnessed among the lower classes, particularly in the more densely populated areas of the west and the south. Ireland seemed the perfect example of Thomas Malthus’s theory of the relationship between population and poverty. Malthus himself held “the predominant evil of Ireland” to be “a population greatly in excess above the demand for labour.” He ascribed this excess to “the rapidity with which potatoes have increased under a system of cultivating them on very small properties rather with a view to support than sale.”³⁸ In Malthus’s view, then, the land system was essentially to blame, since the sub-division of land provided small farmers, cottiers and labourers with the means of subsistence in the form of potatoes. But the arable land would not be able to continue supporting an ever-increasing population ad infinitum, he warned, and “to give the full effect to the natural resources of the country, a great part of the population should be swept from the soil.”³⁹ According to the historian Peter Gray, the younger generation of classical economists were inclined to be less pessimistic than Malthus, arguing that agriculture could be improved and resources developed to keep up with population growth. But at the same time, they confirmed part of the Malthusian view: the cottier system would have to be abandoned. They believed in a model of large-scale farming in which there would be “a division of labour between landlord, capitalist tenant farmer, and landless wage labourers.” This would ensure greater productivity and thus enable “the replacement of subsistence cropping by cash wages.”⁴⁰ As they saw it, capital investment and consolidation of farms were essential to this system. But in pre-Famine Ireland,

³⁷ Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, p. 26.

³⁸ R.D. Collinson Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 86, n. 2.

³⁹ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), pp. 8-9.

many landowners were more interested in turning their properties into large farms for grazing than in developing resources or investing in agricultural improvements to benefit tillage farming. Consequently, the need for agricultural labour decreased, and the poorest section of the population was doomed to struggle with increasingly reduced means of making a living.

In the eighteen-forties, up to 75 per cent of Irish families were dependent on agriculture. Of these, 28.8 per cent held between five and twenty acres of land, while the smallest plots between one and five acres constituted 23.6 per cent of all holdings.⁴¹ With limited access to land, a large population of small farmers, cottiers and labourers had little or no chance of raising themselves above subsistence level. Frequently, they fell below that level and were reduced to begging if, as was the case in the poorest areas, regular employment was impossible to come by. When there was a serious deficiency in the potato crop, as there had been in 1801, 1817 and 1822, or if, as in 1739-41, the crop failed completely, they were left with little or no means of support. These people constituted the “surplus” population of Ireland. To John Mitchel, the very notion was absurd. “Surplus population, in any country”, he wrote, “ought to mean, I suppose, more people than the country itself can give employment and support to.”⁴² In his view, Ireland had resources more than enough to support a population dependent on agriculture, but the problem was that the most vital resource, land, was controlled by a minority to the detriment of the majority. Many of Mitchel’s contemporaries, Irish as well as British, expressed the same opinion. One of them was Jonathan Pim, who noted that

[m]any have attributed this state of chronic poverty to the facility with which a bare subsistence was obtained by the cultivation of the potato. Such does not appear to us to have been the case. The people lived on potatoes because they were poor; and they were poor because they could not obtain regular employment. This want of employment seems in great measure to have arisen from the state of the law, and the practice respecting the occupation and ownership of land.⁴³

His colleague James Hack Tuke argued that “there exists the means in Ireland of supporting, not only as great, but even a greater population than it has hitherto done”, implying that although the means existed, the will did not.⁴⁴ The radical MP George Poulett Scrope insisted that surplus population was “imagined”,

⁴¹ Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, p. 3; Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 8.

⁴² Mitchel, *An Apology*, p. 10.

⁴³ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught*, p. 42.

while the Catholic Archbishop J.W. Doyle held that there would be no such surplus in Ireland “if the resources of the country were properly employed.”⁴⁵

On the other hand, contemporaries also interpreted the problem in Malthusian terms. The *Dublin University Magazine* opined that it would be futile to expect any improvement in the condition of the peasants as long as they chose to ignore “the Law of God that men cannot multiply like brutes without foregoing the benefits and blessings of social progress.”⁴⁶ For Randall McCollum, the famine provided clear proof that Malthus had been right. He argued that “Ireland owes to the potato and the con-acre a surplus population of two or three millions, which came with, and must go with, the potato.” McCollum supported his view with an assertion which reflected his moralist-providentialist interpretation of the potato failure:

The squatter class of cottiers and small farmers could not live in this land without the potato; and now, that God ... has stopped the growth of ignorance and crime, by suspending for a time the law of vegetable life, and the potato will no longer grow to feed an uneducated and wicked population, we must be content with the wise arrangement of Providence.⁴⁷

The notion that Irish poverty was in great measure due to inherent moral deficiencies in the Irish character figured prominently in several British newspapers and periodicals and appears to have been widely accepted in public opinion.⁴⁸ The peasants were commonly seen as lazy, improvident, ignorant, prone to violence, and generally disorderly. Their hostility to change, their stubborn reliance on a single precarious root for their sustenance, and their apparent contentment with living in squalor were seen as obvious indications of their uncivilized state. In moralist thinking, such a people could not be raised from their state of poverty unless they were “improved.” As Thomas Carlyle put it, “[t]he time has come when the Irish population must either be improved a little, or else exterminated.”⁴⁹ Moralism was pervasive in Conservative circles, but it was an orientation also to be found among Liberals. In particular, it informed the ideology of such key members of the Russell administration as Charles Trevelyan, Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Grey, the Home Secretary, and Earl Grey, the Colonial Secretary. They advo-

⁴⁵ George Poulett Scrope, *The Irish Relief Measures, Past and Future* (London: James Ridgway, 1848), p. 70; Archbishop Doyle quoted in Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Randall McCollum, *Sketches of the Highlands of Cavan* (Belfast: J. Reed, 1856), pp. 18-19.

⁴⁸ On the relationship between the press and public opinion, see Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 29.

⁴⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism. Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), p. 19.

cated what Peter Gray has referred to as “a Christian political economy” which championed free trade and *laissez-faire* while also embracing the doctrine of providentialism. But as Gray has shown, Whig ideology pertaining to “the Irish question” was anything but homogenous. In addition to the moralists, Gray identifies two other major groupings within the Whig-Liberal party: moderates and Foxites.⁵⁰ As the famine intensified, these factions not only clashed on the question of how the crisis should be handled, but could also not always agree among themselves on issues of policy. A prevalent, although not universal antipathy to excessive state expenditure on and intervention in the crisis was indicative of the parsimony which characterized the relief efforts undertaken by Russell’s administration. At the same time, views on how the condition of Ireland was to be improved in the long term diverged, and the bickering on this issue tended to draw attention away from the immediate needs of a starving population.

The moderate faction of the Whig-Liberal party included several major Irish landowners such as the Marquess of Lansdowne and the Lords Montague, Palmerston and Clanricarde. Moderates adhered to orthodox political economy and believed that some measure of state intervention would be required to bring about the reorganization of landholding which they saw as essential for the development of large-scale capitalist farming on the English model. Such intervention, they held, would be needed primarily to suppress unruly elements within Irish society and to stimulate the economy. Many moderates, particularly representatives of the landed interest, argued that some assisted emigration would be necessary if the reorganization was to be successful. As they saw it, failure was inevitable unless small farmers and cottiers were removed from the land. Lord Palmerston put it quite bluntly:

[I]t is useless to disguise the truth that any great improvement in the social system of Ireland must be founded upon an extensive change in the present state of agrarian occupation, and that this change necessarily implies a long continued and systematic ejectment of Small Holders and Squatting Cottiers.⁵¹

Nassau Senior, one of the chief proponents of classical political economy, argued along the same lines. “No country can be tranquil or industrious”, he wrote, “in which the proportion of people to the land and capital which em-

⁵⁰ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 17-40. For details on economic doctrines and divisions within the Russell government, see also Gray’s “Ideology and the Famine” in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), pp. 86-103.

⁵¹ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 192.

ploy and support it, is so excessive as to leave them unemployed and destitute, or even unemployed without being destitute, during a considerable portion of every year." There could be no other solution to the problem, he concluded, "except to diminish the number of people, since while that number continues, to increase the demand for their labour is impossible."⁵² Thus the reform policies of the moderates hinged on the removal of the "surplus" population.

Russell and the Earl of Bessborough, Lord Lieutenant in Ireland until May 1847, formed the core of a group of Whigs who, in keeping with the Foxite tradition, spoke for a quite different reform of the system of landholding. Fundamentally anti-Malthusian in outlook and open to heterodox economic ideas, they had plans for the regeneration of Ireland which in many ways differed from those of both the moderates and the moralists. These plans were based on their conviction that Ireland had been misgoverned in the past and that, in order to strengthen the Union which was threatened by Daniel O'Connell's agitation for repeal, it was imperative to introduce new legislation which would give Ireland more political and civil equality within the Union. They also believed that remedial legislation was necessary effectively to change the system of landholding. Unless the laws affecting landlords and tenants were amended, it would be impossible to conciliate the Catholic masses or to cure the backwardness which plagued Irish agricultural practices.⁵³ Legislation which allowed landlords to abuse their power would have to be replaced by measures granting fixity of tenure and the right to fair rent and compensation for improvements, that is, measures aimed at strengthening the position of the tenant in relation to the landlord. The Russell circle also stressed the need to find a way of mitigating the negative consequences of the ruthless competition for land which the practice of subdivision had led to, and they sought the answer to the problem in, as Russell himself put it, "some great scheme with regard to cultivation, preparation and tillage of the waste lands."⁵⁴ The idea was not new, but it had scarcely been considered seriously before the potato failure. It

⁵² [Nassau William Senior], "The Relief of Irish Distress in 1847 and 1848", *Edinburgh Review*, lxxxix (January 1849), pp. 221-68 [252, 268].

⁵³ Agricultural backwardness, particularly as manifest in the neglect and poor management of natural resources, was commonly seen by contemporaries as a major reason for the perceived lack of economic progress in Ireland. In a pamphlet published in 1847, Jonathan Pim deplored what he saw as a terrible waste of potential riches: "A country naturally fertile is left almost unimproved and only half cultivated; the fields are undrained; the rivers, left without care, overflow their banks and turn good land into marsh; straggling hedges and uncultivated spots deform the face of the country ... and much land capable of culture is left to its natural wildness, or is so ill tilled that it is but little better than waste." Quoted in Mary Daly, "Farming and the Famine", in Cormac Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150* (Dublin:Teagasc/UCD, 1997), pp. 29-48 [29].

⁵⁴ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 158.

was further developed in 1846 by Scrope and the economists William Thornton and John Stuart Mill. In their view, the reclamation of waste lands in order to provide employment for wage labourers was not enough. The competition for land, they claimed, could only be relieved if the reclaiming labourers were settled on the land as proprietors in their own right. Although sympathetic to the notion of tenant right, Mill preferred a system of peasant proprietorship since, he thought, it would meet with less opposition from the landed interest than a forced imposition of tenant right. Moreover, he argued, owning land would promote an improved work ethic among the peasantry:

Property in the soil has a sort of magic power of engendering industry, perseverance, forethought in an agricultural people. Any other charm for producing these qualities we know not of[.] ... All other schemes for the improvement of Ireland are schemes for getting rid of the people.

Scrope shared this optimistic view with Mill. He envisioned that tenants evicted from their holdings would be turned into “a *class of yeomanry* – so wanted in Ireland, *cultivating their own lands for their sole profit*” [original emphasis].⁵⁵ Moderate liberals and, inevitably, Irish landlords were averse to this idea as well as to that of tenant right because of the implications for the rights of property, and the moralists objected to peasant proprietorship on the grounds that Irish peasants lacked the moral qualities required to hold such a position.

According to Peter Gray, the moralists were “optimists with a genuine belief in the liberating potential of free trade”, and they were confident that “the Irish wages fund [the ability of Irish property to provide labour for wages] was large enough to allow rapid growth if that society was exposed to moral stimuli.”⁵⁶ They saw the moral failings of peasants as well as landlords as one of the main obstacles to the improvement and progress of Irish economy and society. Landlords were held to have failed in their responsibilities by neglecting their estates and by allowing and even exploiting the subdivision of land, which had led to overpopulation, while the peasants had remained indolent and improvident even in the face of extreme poverty and hardship. A very significant factor contributing to this moral degeneration was the potato which, in the words of Sir John Burgoyne, Chairman of the Relief Commission in 1847, provided “an easy mode of subsistence, and led to the encouragement of early marriages, large families, and a rapidly increasing population, and at the same time afforded the proprietor very good return of profit for his land.”⁵⁷ Therefore, it was essential

⁵⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 157, 154.

⁵⁶ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 4.

that the lower orders cease to be dependent on the potato and move to grain cultivation. Moralists were convinced that Irish resources could very well support such a transition if all the parties concerned were induced to exert themselves to the full. "If the cultivable land of Ireland were tolerably cultivated", Trevelyan argued, "there would be an abundance of employment, according to a higher standard of living, for an even larger population than the present."⁵⁸ But this raises the question of how, under the prevailing system of landholding, a large family occupying a small plot was to survive on grain cultivation when substantially more acreage was required to yield a grain crop comparable to a crop of potatoes. It would appear that unless the lower classes were granted more access to land, a transition to grain cultivation could not possibly improve their situation. Since neither re-distribution of land nor reclamation of wastelands to benefit cottiers and holders of conacre was part of the moralist agenda, the notion of "an abundance of employment" seems somewhat utopian. Trevelyan was aware of this, as he indicates in *The Irish Crisis*:

The small patches of land which maintained a family when laid down to potatoes, are insufficient for the purpose when laid down to corn[,] ... and corn cultivation requires capital and skill and combined labour, which the cottier [*sic*] and conacre tenants do not possess. The position occupied by these classes is no longer tenable, and it is necessary for them either to become substantial farmers or to live by the wages of their labour.⁵⁹

But supposing that he had somehow managed to survive the famine, by what means was a cottier or a holder of conacre to become a substantial farmer? Or how was he to work for wages if landlords were either unwilling or unable to provide sufficient employment for him to survive on those wages? In spite of its anti-Malthusian optimism, it would seem that Trevelyan's "remedy" could not possibly be implemented without the removal of the "surplus" population.

In contrast to Daniel O'Connell, who put his trust in the Whigs because of the apparent commitment of the Russell circle to "justice to Ireland", John Mitchel was convinced that neither Sir Robert Peel's nor Russell's governments had any serious interest in promoting measures which would benefit the Irish people. On the contrary, he believed that their chief concern was to solve the problem of how to get rid of the "multitudinous Celts." By 1844, he claimed, the notion of a surplus population in Ireland had become established: it was "unquestioned and axiomatic in political circles", not necessarily because it reflected the true condition of the country, but because it was a useful concept

⁵⁸ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 232.

⁵⁹ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 120.

in explaining and justifying British policies pertaining to the Irish question. “Surplus population””, Mitchel explained,

is a comparative term, and its meaning will vary according to what it may be that the said population is *wanted* for. Now, the sole use for an Irish population – considered from an English point of view – is to raise provisions for the English to consume, make up rents to be spent in England, and take off a large quantity of English manufactures: and if there be more than the number required to cultivate the soil, or tend cattle on the pastures, under the most improved system of high-farming and cattle-feeding, for English markets, then, there is *surplus*. [original emphasis] (82)

In Mitchel’s interpretation, this was the reasoning behind the “principles of political economy” which were to determine government policies throughout the famine years. As he saw it, the fact that Ireland produced “more than double” the amount of food to sustain her own population was irrelevant since, in terms of British political economy, “surplus produce” did not mean “the balance remaining for export over and above what is needed for the consumption of the people”, but “all the grain and meat which is actually carried away from Ireland ... whether the people have enough for their own consumption or not.”⁶⁰ In other words, the “surplus produce” was not destined to feed a “surplus population” in Ireland; it was needed to feed “eight millions of people in England.” The perceived overpopulation, Mitchel implied, posed a threat to British interests by impeding the improvement of agriculture on the English model, thus endangering the influx of Irish revenues and the continued export of Irish produce to England, and so it was necessary to reduce the population. “Ireland”, he commented sarcastically, “was the only country in the world which had both surplus produce for export and surplus population for export; – too much food for her people, and too many people for her food” (82).

According to Mitchel, an urge to “export” people from Ireland which had existed since the early seventeenth century was given fresh impetus by the report of the Devon Commission published in 1845. The commission was appointed in 1843 by Sir Robert Peel’s government to inquire into landlord-tenant relations and the practice of landholding in Ireland, and to suggest legal amendments which might promote an improved system of agriculture. “This commission looked like a deliberate fraud from the first”, Mitchel contends:

It was composed entirely of landlords[.] ... It was at all times quite certain that they would see no evidence of any evils to be redressed on the part of the tenants; and that, if they recommended any measures, those measures

⁶⁰ Mitchel, *An Apology*, p. 10.

would be such as should promote and make more sweeping the depopulation of the country.

As for the commission's report, he continues, it "has become the very creed and gospel of British statesmen" and "the programme and scheme upon which the Last Conquest of Ireland was undertaken" (68). Mitchel makes these remarks prior to any explanation of what the report contained regarding the situation of the peasants or what kind of recommendations as to improvements the commission made in it. Thus he deprives his readers of the opportunity to form their own opinions on the matter, while his method of representing it precludes any possibility of good intent that may have motivated the inquiry. Proceeding to "examine" the report in the next few pages, Mitchel succumbs to the same condensation and selection that he accuses the commissioners of employing for the purpose of giving "the pieces of evidence which they liked best." His purpose is to demonstrate that there was "a conspiracy of landlords and legislators to destroy the people" and that the Devon report provided a notable incentive to the realization of that genocidal intent. Accordingly, he focuses on the negative attitude of the commissioners to the granting of tenant right (a measure which would have been recommended as "the only measure for Ireland, by any other Commission than a Commission of Irish landlords"), their insistence on the necessity of farm consolidation and their endorsement of emigration as ways of removing "surplus" population from the soil. "Such was the Devon programme", Mitchel notes in conclusion, "Tenant-Right to be disallowed; one million people to be *removed*[,] ... to be thinned, to be cleared off: but all in the way of "amelioration." They were to be ameliorated out of their lives" (71-72; original emphasis).⁶¹

Mitchel uses the Devon report as a launching pad for his numerous ironic inversions of British intent in regard to Ireland. By putting the word amelioration in inverted commas, he signals to his readers that the remedial measures proposed by the commission were quite the reverse of ameliorative. Since the Irish people, even when agitating for repeal of the Union, had not given the government "the slightest excuse for letting loose troops and making a *battue* of them", it was necessary to find other means of getting rid of the "surplus population." Although the government expected the Devon report to precipitate the "extermination of tenantry", Mitchel insinuates, they feared that it would be "too slow for their purposes" (75). But the arrival in September 1845 of *phytho-*

⁶¹ The Devon Commission and their report came in for rather severe criticism from a number of contemporaries, although relatively few accused them of being so sinister in their purpose as Mitchel did. See Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 58-78.

phthora infestans, a previously unknown fungal disease to which the “lumper”, the potato most commonly grown at the time, had no resistance at all, brought the prospect of a swift solution to the perceived population problem. In Mitchel’s reading of subsequent events, “the potato blight, and consequent famine, placed in the hands of the British government an engine of State by which they were eventually enabled to clear off ... two millions and a half of the “surplus population” (82-83). But they covered up their real motive by introducing various “relief” measures which resulted in the people dying of starvation because available food was exported; dying of diseases deriving from starvation; dying from hunger and exposure on the public works while toiling for insufficient wages; dying in the workhouses or in the open after they were evicted from their homes; dying on “coffin ships” when they were forced to emigrate. All of this, Mitchel asserts, was orchestrated by two successive British governments, with the consent of Irish landlords, and all in the name of relief. Incensed and exasperated by what he saw as the government’s murderous intent concealed by a false show of “benevolent motives”, Mitchel offered a “solution” to the perceived problem of overpopulation in an open letter published in the *Nation*. “Now, my dear surplus brethren”, he wrote,

I have a simple, a sublime, a patriotic project to suggest. It must be plain to you that you *are* surplus, and must somehow be got rid of. Do not wait ingloriously for the famine to sweep you off – if you must die, die gloriously; serve your country by your death, and shed around your names the halo of a patriot’s fame. Go; choose out in all the island two million trees, and there-upon *go and hang yourselves*. [original emphasis] ⁶²

This piece of ironic “advice” reflects not only Mitchel’s attitude to British remedial measures but also his growing impatience with the O’Connellite insistence on “peaceful agitation” within the limits of the law as the only means of resistance to British oppression. “Because the Irish have been taught peaceful agitation in their slavery”, he asserts in *Jail Journal*, “they have been swept by a plague of hunger worse than many years of bloody fighting.”⁶³ As we shall see later, Daniel O’Connell’s opposition to armed resistance is at issue also in Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine* and Walter Macken’s *The Silent People*.

⁶² *Nation*, 21 August 1847, quoted in Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament* [1982] (Swords: Poolbeg Press, 1988), pp. 146-47. Mitchel’s “advice” was, perhaps unwittingly, echoed by Thomas Carlyle in 1849. “Beggars, beggars”, he wrote, “only industry *really* followed by the Irish people[.] ... ‘Wouldn’t it be worth your consideration, whether you hadn’t better drown or hang yourselves, than live a dog’s life in this way?’ They withdrew from me in horror.” *Reminiscences of My Irish Journey in 1849* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1882), p. 223.

⁶³ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. 88.

By the end of 1847, Mitchel was openly speaking for armed resistance. In *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, he claims that if the Irish were “mowed down by shot and sabre, they would die a better death than was usual at that period; for no carnage could be so hideous as the British famine.” Thus “a patriot’s fame” was not to be sought through suicide for the gratification of the oppressor, but through revolution, even if that meant perishing in the effort to obtain “redress of their wrongs.” For such action, he maintains, the Irish were “as well prepared as they ever would be” (158). This reveals an irrational side of Mitchel. It is difficult to conceive how a people prostrated by two years of famine could possibly be “prepared” to rise up in arms against the British empire. Mitchel does concede that his expectations in regard to the people were too high. Since they had been “schooled for forty years in the fatal cant of moral force” (180) and “dispirited by famine and long submission to insolent oppression” (189-90), they had become “a hopeless sort of material for spirited national resistance” (196). The pacificatory attitude of Irish leaders (wholly endorsed by the Catholic Church), British subjugation and “British famine”, together with the tyranny of landlords, had eroded the spirit of rebellion in this “essentially military people” (60) to such an extent that it was not to be revived by even the most eloquent advocate of revolution:

[H]ow could the storm-voice of Demosthenes, and the burning song of Tyrtæus rouse such a people as this! A whole Pentecost of fiery tongues, if they descended upon such a dull material, would fall extinguished in smoke and stench like a lamp blown out. (197)

Here, Mitchel seeks to defend himself and those of his colleagues in Young Ireland who failed to stage a successful rebellion. At the same time, there is a covert criticism of the “dull material” for having allowed itself to be indoctrinated and subjugated. Although Mitchel declares that he is “proud of [his] people” (60), he is ultimately unable to hide his disappointment with them for failing to respond to Young Ireland’s call to rebellion in 1848. “If the people had not been too gentle, forgiving and submissive”, he laments, “this island could never have become a horror and scandal to the world” (68).

1.1.3. Exports, ‘relief’ and wholesale evictions.

The continuous exportation of what Mitchel ironically referred to as “surplus” produce from Ireland during the years of famine provided one of the cornerstones for his allegation of genocide. In the pages of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, he repeatedly conjures up the image of huge quantities of food in various

forms leaving Irish ports while those who had raised that food were starving to death. Like many of his contemporaries, he called for the prohibition of exports so as to prevent deaths from starvation already expected to occur in the wake of the first potato failure. While insisting that the right of the people to the food they had produced should take precedence over the demands of the export market, he referred to other European countries hit by the potato blight in 1845-47 where steps were taken to retain available food for home consumption. Yet he was convinced that the British government would not countenance any such arrangements, even if they were only temporary expedients. "It was ... fondly imagined by some sanguine persons", he writes, "that the government had it in contemplation to stop the export of provisions from Ireland - as the Belgian legislature had from Belgium[,] ... until our own people should first be fed" (98).⁶⁴ But, he argues, since Ireland had been deprived of self-government through the Act of Union, it was futile to suggest a policy which would overturn the proviso of free trade between Ireland and England incorporated in that act. Because of their lack of independence, the Irish had no means of holding on to their "surplus" produce which was "regularly going over to England at the rate of seventeen millions worth per annum." "In any independent country", Mitchel comments,

it would have at once occurred to an ordinary mind that the two surplusages [*sic*] could have been made to swallow one another - that is, the surplus of people could have swallowed the surplus of food, and then there would have been no surplus at all.

In Ireland under the Union, such a solution was out of the question as England exacted her "tribute" every year, famine or no famine. She did so, Mitchel claims, because "the British empire *needed* that seventeen millions per annum to be spent in England, just as she requires the revenues of Indian rajahs to support her younger sons in the style which they have a right to expect" [original emphasis].⁶⁵ By juxtaposing Ireland and India, he firmly places the former within the colonial context: both countries are exploited by a greedy colonizing power which, it is suggested, has no other means of supporting its own extravagances. But what Mitchel found even more intolerable was that Irish produce was literally feeding and thus upholding an oppressive power structure while the Irish people were starving to death. In December 1846, as reports of the

⁶⁴ For an analysis of the official response to the food crisis in Belgium and some other European countries, see Peter Gray, "Famine relief policy in comparative perspective: Ireland, Scotland, and north-western Europe, 1845-1849", *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 86-108.

⁶⁵ Mitchel, *An Apology*, p. 11.

horrible state of Skibbereen in County Cork began to appear in the press, he wrote an editorial in which he pointed out that Irish grain and cattle were not exported merely in order to supply the “excellent table” of the English labourer:

The rock of Gibraltar grows no corn, but the County of Cork does; and such is the admirable working of the Union and the colonial system between [England and Ireland], that the garrison and citizens of Gibraltar live well, and feed abundantly ... while in the County of Cork, in a place there called Skibbereen, families of men, women and children, are lying in heaps in the corners of mud hovels, some dead, and some alive[.] ... Skibbereen starves, and raves, and dies, *in order* that Gibraltar and St. Helena, and the rest of them, may be kept in good condition to support garrisons, and victual cruisers, and maintain the naval power of Great Britain in all the ends of the earth. [original emphasis] ⁶⁶

Criticism of “surplus” exports did not begin with Mitchel. William Cobbett, the radical journalist and editor of *Cobbett’s Political Register*, visited Ireland in 1834. In letters and speeches, he commented on the anomaly of food being exported while the labouring people were forced to subsist on “nasty, filthy hog-feed”, that is, potatoes. His contention was that exporting food, to any country, was wrong when the producers themselves did not have enough to eat. Making an example of his fellow Englishmen who were consuming “Irish flour, Irish meat, and Irish butter”, he wrote:

There they are with their red cheeks, their fat round faces[,] ... their Sunday clothes; they live well[.] ... While this is the mode of the husbandman and the artisan living in England, what, I say, can be the cause that those who raise the food in this country, and who send it over to the English farmers to eat, have not a morsel of food to put into their mouths? ⁶⁷

This is suggestive of Mitchel’s juxtaposition of English dyspepsia and Irish dysentery. Apparently, Mitchel knew his Cobbett. He pushed the contrasting images a bit further, but the two of them were in complete agreement as to “the cause.” Like Mitchel, Cobbett believed that the Union was to blame for most of Ireland’s social and economic evils, including the exportation of food. “It is too much for insanity itself”, he wrote, “to adopt the belief, that eight millions and a half of people can, for any length of time, continue in a state of *colonial relationship* to twelve millions, about two or three millions of whom they supply with food” [original emphasis].⁶⁸ Mitchel himself used the writings of Jonathan

⁶⁶ *Nation*, 26 December 1846, quoted in Gallagher, *Paddy’s Lament*, p. 43.

⁶⁷ Denis Knight (ed.), *Cobbett in Ireland: A Warning to England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), p. 69.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Swift to historicize his critique of British dominion in Ireland. In 1847, he edited a booklet entitled *Irish Political Economy* in which Swift's *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (1727) was included. In this pamphlet, Swift enumerates fourteen conditions which he sees as prerequisite to "any Countries flourishing and growing rich", such as self-government, the spending of rents and revenues at home, and the improvement and encouragement of agriculture. Ireland meets none of these conditions for prosperity, he claims, because she is subject to British domination. In his preface, Mitchel remarks that "every evil which then excited the indignation of the Dean ... has been since aggravated", and that "the warnings, advice, and remonstrances, which were addressed to our ancestors ... suit our condition exactly to this day."⁶⁹ He places special emphasis on Swift's "first Cause of a Kingdom's thriving", that is, "the Fruitfulness of the Soil, to produce Necessaries and Conveniences of Life; not only sufficient for the Inhabitants, but for Exportation into other Countries."⁷⁰ This apparently has a bearing on the current state of famine in Ireland, for in a footnote he comments:

The Dean seems to have looked upon the supply of the inhabitants themselves with the necessaries of life, as the first and main consideration; and *after* that he would export the surplus. But modern political economy calls exported produce "surplus", whether the people of the exporting country perish for want of it or not. [original emphasis]⁷¹

Thus Mitchel appropriates Swift's text to support his own view of British domination and oppression as long-established facts of Irish life and to suggest that allowing exports in times of scarcity is just an instance of British attempts to uphold an artificial famine.

Mitchel and his fellow Young Irelanders were by no means alone in questioning the government's refusal to prohibit exports. Several radical and conservative politicians, relief officers, and Irish as well as English newspapers expressed their disapproval, especially after the harvest of 1846 when large-scale exports were again going forward. In September, the chairman of the Relief Commission, Sir Randolph Routh, noted that 300,000 quarters of oats had already been shipped out. "I know there is a great and serious objection to any interference with these exports", he wrote to Trevelyan, "yet it is a most serious evil."⁷² Isaac Butt contested the notion that the annual exports of Irish grain and cattle constituted a surplus. "I know of no surplus produce", he said, "until all

⁶⁹ Irish Confederation, *Irish Political Economy*, pp. iii-iv.

⁷⁰ Joseph McMinin (ed.), *Swift's Irish Pamphlets* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991), p. 107.

⁷¹ Irish Confederation, *Irish Political Economy*, p. 9.

⁷² Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 69.

our own people are fed.”⁷³ Poulett Scrope castigated the government for making no attempt to “directly stop the drain of food from the country”⁷⁴, and Deputy Commissary Edward Pine Coffin pointed out “the inconsistency of importing supplies into a country which is at the same time exporting its own resources.”⁷⁵ The editor of the *Waterford Freeman* also remarked on this apparent paradox: “When Indian corn and meal is purchased for our support, and carried across half the globe for our use, is it not a most unaccountable anomaly ... that we are sending our wheat, corn, meal and flour out of the country?”⁷⁶ Mitchel takes this criticism a step further, accusing the government of deception as well as parsimony. Having admitted that they did purchase Indian corn for Irish use and set up depots for its distribution, he continues:

[B]ut as to this[,] ... their mysterious intimations had led all the world to believe that they would provide very large quantities; whereas, in fact, the quantity imported by them was inadequate to supply the loss of the grain *exported* from any one county; and a government ship sailing into any harbour with Indian corn was sure to meet half a dozen sailing out with Irish wheat and cattle. [original emphasis] (112)

The importation of what turned out to be insufficient food supplies was, then, not a genuine attempt to alleviate the famine but an instance of “government spoon-feeding” which was “highly demoralizing” since it tended to make the people “rely upon [the government] for everything.” This kind of relief, Mitchel claims, was wholly in keeping with England’s designs on Ireland as it engendered “a dependent and pauper spirit” which posed no threat to British supremacy (113). A hungry, demoralized population was unlikely to engage much in the efforts to dissolve the Union, and thus England would not be in danger of losing her “store farm.”

In Mitchel’s interpretation, each successive relief measure was designed by the government to demoralize and pauperize the people even further, and to ensure that they were reduced in numbers. Before proceeding to demonstrate how the famine, by way of ostensible relief, became a “weapon” for the destruction of the Irish people, he reminds his readers that “all the powers, revenues, and resources of Ireland had been transferred to London. The Imperial Parliament had dealt at its pleasure with the “sister island” for forty-six years, and had brought us to this”, that is, a state of famine. The point he wants to emphasize,

⁷³ Quoted in Irish Confederation, *Irish Political Economy*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Scrope, *The Irish Relief Measures, Past and Future*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* [1961] (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 75.

⁷⁶ *Waterford Freeman*, 3 October 1846.

again, is that Ireland is subject to a colonizer and, therefore, has no control over her own destiny:

Well, then, whatsoever duties may be supposed to fall upon a government, in case of such a national calamity, rested on the English government. We had no legislature at home; in the Imperial legislature we had but a delusive resemblance of representation[.] ... We had no authoritative mode of even suggesting what measures might (in mere Irish opinion) meet the case. (93)

Consequently, Ireland was obliged to accept relief measures devised by the British government whether they were beneficial or not. As Mitchel saw it, none of them was, and the public works scheme was a case in point. Initiated by Peel's government in the early months of 1846, the works were discontinued in August because the new Whig administration considered the system extravagant, ineffective and liable to abuse. New legislation, principally devised by Trevelyan at the Treasury, was introduced. Under the terms of the Labour Rate Act, the task of selecting people for employment was transferred from the local relief committees to the Board of Works in order to ensure that only destitute persons were taken on. Committee members could still make recommendations, but they were no longer empowered to issue tickets for employment. This centralization of control, it was believed, would minimize abuse and keep down the number of people employed. Peel's "half-grant" system, under which the Treasury had paid fifty per cent of the total cost of the works, was abandoned since it was deemed too generous and too easily abused, especially by landlords taking advantage of the grants to improve their own estates. Henceforth, the money advanced by the Treasury was to be paid back out of local taxes in the form of a county cess levied for the sole purpose of financing the works. To prevent expenditure of public funds on the improvement of private property, reproductive works were no longer allowed, and labourers were to be paid by task work rates (payment based on the amount of work done) because fixed day wages allegedly encouraged idleness.

In Mitchel's appraisal of the immediate effects of the Labour Rate Act, his style of writing conveys a sense of the total chaos which he saw as characteristic of the whole public works scheme:

Over the whole island, for the next few months, was a scene of confused and wasteful attempts at relief; bewildered barony sessions striving to understand the voluminous directions, schedules, and specifications under which alone they could vote their own money to relieve the poor at their own doors; but generally making mistakes, - for the unassisted human faculties never could comprehend those ten thousand books and fourteen tons of paper; insolent

commissioners and inspectors, and clerks snubbing them at every turn, and ordering them to study the documents: efforts on the part of the proprietors to expend some of the rates at least on useful works, reclaiming land or the like; which efforts were always met with flat refusal and a lecture on political economy; (for political economy, it seems, declared that the works must be strictly useless, – as cutting down a road where there was no hill, or building a bridge where there was no water, – until many good roads became impassable on account of pits and trenches): plenty of jobbing and speculation all this while. (120)

The main cause of this chaos, Mitchel implies, was the incomprehensible bureaucracy which the government had imposed on the administration of the works. His point here is that this was a *contrived* chaos, brought about by bureaucratic subtleties intended to impede and delay the implementation of the works, thus causing further loss of life. Government control, while effectively preventing those who were ultimately paying for this form of relief from exerting any influence on how it was to be executed, had resulted only in delays and corruption. Mitchel undermines the professed ameliorative purpose of the public works by claiming that they contributed nothing to the improvement of the country. The “perversions of labour” led not only to the destruction of perfectly good roads, but to the demoralization of the peasants who abandoned their agricultural pursuits and flocked to the works “in the wild, blind hope of public relief” (122). The imposition of task work put an end to that hope for many labourers who were already enfeebled by hunger and disease. “The poor people, delving Macadamised roads with spades and turf-cutters, could not earn as much as would keep them alive”, Mitchel fumes, adding that “luckily, they were thereby disabled from destroying so much good road” (123). The flippancy of the latter comment mirrors the cynicism which Mitchel finds inherent in the notion of heavy road works as a form of relief for a starving, enfeebled population. Instead of relieving the misery, the Labour Rate Act had aggravated it and thus served to advance the government’s “plan” to depopulate the country. Unable to cope with additional heavy rates, small tenant farmers were forced to give up their holdings, and “ejectment and extermination had never been so active before.” Although the measure was pronounced a “failure” in England, Mitchel writes, “for the real aims and purposes of British policy, it was no failure at all.”⁷⁷ Yet those employed by the Board of Works would not necessarily have shared in Mitchel’s criticism. As the works were gradually closing down in the spring and early summer of 1847, several localities in counties Clare, Limerick, Galway and Cork erupted in violent resistance, with

⁷⁷ Mitchel, *An Apology*, pp. 38-39.

discharged labourers attacking officials and plundering mills and food stores while demanding re-employment.⁷⁸ Although there had been a certain amount of discontent among the employees, especially in regard to wages and the perceived unfairness of task work, a considerable portion of the poor apparently saw the public works as their best chance of survival, and they were making an effort to hold on to that chance.

By March 1847, the public works scheme was on the verge of total collapse. The number of people employed had reached 714,000 and the Board of Works found that it was no longer able to provide work for an ever-increasing number of applicants. The government had been forced to admit that the system had become too unwieldy to operate and that it had failed to provide adequate relief. Moreover, it had proved extremely expensive; the total cost of the works rose to almost five million pounds.⁷⁹ The decision to close down the works was followed by a change in policy. Under the provisions of the Temporary Relief Act passed in February, short term relief was to be provided through the establishment of government soup kitchens throughout the country. These kitchens were then to prepare and distribute cooked food to the destitute poor without charge. Thus for the first time, gratuitous relief was to be allowed, although only temporarily. The scheme, which was ultimately to be financed by the local poor rates, would remain in operation through September. Thereafter, relief was to become the responsibility of a revised poor law system. But like its predecessor, this scheme, too, was hampered by a cumbersome bureaucracy and a myriad of rules and regulations which, again, caused great delays and problems in the setting-up and operation of the system. Consequently, the poor in many districts were left without any means of relief, except for that which private charity could provide, between the closing of the public works and the opening of the soup kitchens, and the period was marked by increasingly high levels of mortality due to starvation and famine-related diseases. This, Mitchel wearily notes, was only to be expected from another “relief” measure devised and controlled by the government; destruction was again on offer in the disguise of relief. “The Temporary Relief Act”, he comments,

distributing ... its mystic leaves by the myriad and the million, - setting charitable people everywhere to con its pamphlets, and compare clause with clause, - putting everybody in terror of its rates, and in horror of its inspectors, - was likely to pass the summer bravely. It would begin to be partly un-

⁷⁸ Andrés Eiriksson, “Food Supply and Food Riots”, in Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150*, pp. 67-91 [84-85].

⁷⁹ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, pp. 91, 97.

derstood about August; would expire in September: – and in September the “persons connected with Government” expected their round two millions of carcasses. (127)

This is all Mitchel has to say about the soup kitchen scheme. Any mention of its conceivably positive effects is studiously avoided while the predetermined outcome is duly emphasized so as to reinforce the notion of evil intent on the part of the government. Thus readers come away from Mitchel’s text without having learned that, by the first week of July, government rations were feeding over three million people,⁸⁰ and that mortality was significantly reduced during the summer months. In spite of its shortcomings and the people’s initial resistance to it as a form of relief which, they felt, reduced them to the status of beggars, the soup kitchen scheme provided relatively effective and cheap short term relief. But contrary to the proclamation of the exulted Trevelyan, it did not stay the famine.⁸¹ The kitchens were all closed down by the end of September, and the people who had been dependent on the rations were left to either fend for themselves or become dependent on poor law relief. From then on, poor rates levied on Irish property were to pay for Irish poverty, while state-sponsored relief was to be avoided as far as possible.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847, a revision of the original Poor Law of 1838, stipulated that destitute persons unable to work because of old age, infirmity or sickness, destitute widows with two or more dependent children, and orphans were entitled to relief either inside or outside the workhouse. Destitute able-bodied persons (i.e. those capable of work) were generally granted relief inside the workhouse only. But if the house in question for some reason or other was unable to provide for them, they could receive outdoor relief in the form of cooked food for a period of two months at a time, pending the approval of the Poor Law Commissioners. Able-bodied recipients of relief were expected to work for at least eight hours a day at some unproductive, heavy task such as stone-breaking. Prior to the new law taking effect, a further amendment devised by the Irish MP William Gregory was appended to it as a concession to Irish landlords. Under the terms of the Gregory, or quarter-acre, clause, those occupying holdings of more than one quarter of an acre were not entitled to public relief unless they surrendered their plots. The task of administering the Poor Law, including the management of the workhouses, was to be the responsibility of the Boards of Guardians in each of the 130 Poor Law unions. The guardians were answerable to the Irish Poor Law Commission headed by

⁸⁰ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 85.

⁸¹ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 65.

Edward Twisleton, while the Commission in turn was supervised by the Treasury. Although the duty of financing relief was transferred to Irish landlords and tenant farmers, the Treasury was still in control of the implementation of the new relief policies. The only financial aid the unions might expect to come out of the imperial purse was in the form of loans, repayable when the rates had been collected. An exception to this rule were the twenty-two unions situated along the western seaboard which were officially designated “distressed” and eligible for government assistance for a limited period of time.⁸²

Given the condition of the Irish poor in the autumn of 1847, the new legislation might be seen as having paved the way for disaster. Although there had been no re-appearance of blight, the acreage of potatoes sown the previous spring was greatly reduced, owing partly to the shortage of seed potatoes and partly to neglect as small farmers, cottiers and labourers had turned to the public works rather than trust the land to yield a healthy crop. Cargoes of grain and meal from abroad were by now steadily coming in to the country and food prices had fallen substantially, but since the closing of the public works, the people had no money at all to buy food. The same lack of money prevented smallholders from substituting some alternative crop for the potato, since purchasing other seed was beyond their means. The grain harvest of 1847 was abundant, but a considerable part of the labour force was hard put to find employment even at the relatively low rate of 8d. a day. The farmers who normally provided harvest work were by this time in financial difficulties, and with the threat of increasing poor rates set to exacerbate their situation, they avoided hiring labour and strove to manage the work with the help of their families. After the harvest, the private labour market declined even further, and the demand for outdoor relief for the able-bodied increased accordingly. By the end of the year, the poor law relief system was already under heavy pressure as many workhouses were filled to capacity or overcrowded, while each week brought a growing number of starving and sick people to their doors in search of food and shelter. In many unions, the guardians were unable to collect rates sufficient to cover the costs of relief, a problem which was to grow worse during the coming two years. All occupiers of land were required to pay rates, except those who held plots valued at less than £4; for these, the landlord was liable. This meant heavy financial burdens for proprietors whose estates were greatly subdivided, and in a bid to escape ruin between lost rents and exorbitant rates, many of them found it necessary to rid their land of small farmers and cottiers. Captain Arthur Kennedy,

⁸² Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, pp. 171,181; Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 102.

the Poor Law inspector in Kilrush union, County Clare, blamed the £4 rating for indirectly causing misery among the smallholders, claiming that it “induces excessive evictions” because the landlords “must do it [evict] as a measure of self-defence.”⁸³ A statement by Lord Clanricarde, a Galway proprietor and MP, may serve as an example of landlords bearing out this claim. “The landlords are prevented from aiding or tolerating poor tenants”, he said. “They are compelled to hunt out all such, to save their property from the £4 clause.”⁸⁴

Clearances were facilitated by the Gregory clause as many landlords, contrary to the letter of the law, insisted that tenants give up all of their land, as well as their cabins, before they could receive public relief. The result was large-scale evictions, particularly in unions where mass destitution was prevalent, starting in late 1847 and peaking in 1849 and 1850. The clause also contributed to high mortality rates during the following two years. Tenants who chose to hold on to their plots of land were likely to face starvation sooner or later since they were ineligible for relief. Those who were evicted but unwilling to enter the workhouse or prevented from doing so because it was full ended up exposed to the elements in makeshift shelters, in many cases miles away from the nearest workhouse where, at best, they could hope to receive rations. The threat of eviction was very real also for middling farmers who found themselves caught between the rate collector and the landlord demanding his rent. Rather than risk eviction and face the workhouse, those who still had the means chose the emigrant ship, but many others deferred going until it was too late. The Reverend J. Garrett of Ballymote complained to the Society of Friends about this loss: “So oppressive is the poor rate”, he wrote, “that the better sort of farmers are daily emigrating to America.”⁸⁵ The relentless collecting of rates, in some localities enforced by police and militia, continued while destitution grew in 1848. By February, almost 450,000 people were in receipt of outdoor relief, and by the end of June the number was 834,000.⁸⁶ Many unions, particularly those in the south and the west designated “distressed”, were on the verge of bankruptcy, and the Poor Law Commissioners had serious doubts that the rates, even if successfully collected, could continue to support such massive poverty. The chances were further diminished by the return of the potato blight in August, and the persistent refusal of the Treasury to intervene made the prospects for the coming year

⁸³ Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 151.

⁸⁴ Quoted in John Joseph Conwell, *A Galway Landlord during the Great Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 51.

⁸⁵ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 354.

⁸⁶ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 106.

bleak indeed. In December, the inspector of the Ballina Union in County Mayo expressed his disillusionment with the Poor Law:

The question must now be determined whether the experiment of making property support poverty is to be continued in the west of Ireland. I have no doubt whatsoever, such an experiment must ultimately fail, and I therefore think it would be most cruel to persevere in it[.] ... This taxation has brought all classes to the verge of ruin.⁸⁷

Similar opinions were by this time frequently voiced in Ireland at large. For example, in a diary entry of the same month, Elizabeth Smith noted that

[t]he poor-houses are choke full and there never were more poor abroad – the rates are becoming heavier without lessening the destitution of the lower orders while they reduce to the verge of want every class above. A pestilence must overtake us.⁸⁸

Mitchel, too, notes that the Poor Law was “on all hands admitted to be a failure”, but adds that it was so only “as to its ostensible purpose.” Its *real* purpose, he claims, was “reducing the body of the people to ‘able-bodied pauperism’”, and in this respect, it had been “no failure at all, but a complete success” (152). He denounces the Poor Law Amendment Act as “the most destructive” of all “the ‘Relief measures’ contrived by the English Parliament” (125). The harsh terms of outdoor relief dictated by the Gregory clause had ensured that “millions of people were left landless and homeless”, and this was “strictly in accordance with British policy” (138). These landless and homeless millions, while “perishing fast of hunger and typhus”, were not dying fast enough, he explains, and there followed “an eager desire in England to get rid of the Celts by *emigration*” (139; original emphasis). Thus Mitchel brings his readers back to the issue of surplus population and, with it, the notion of enforced exile. Commenting on a “select committee” recommending emigration as a suitable means of removing “excess labour”, he ridicules their declaration that “the emigration ... must be voluntary” and their pronounced impression that the people were anxious to emigrate. But, he declares, when conditions become unbearable, people will eventually succumb to emigration whether they want to or not:

Men pursued by wild beasts will show a pervading anxiety to go *anywhere* out of reach[.] ... If men clear estates, and chase the human surplus from pillar to post, in such sort that out-door relief becomes the national way of living, you may be sure there will be a deep and pervading anxiety to

⁸⁷ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 355.

⁸⁸ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 206.

get away; and then the exterminators may form themselves into a “committee” (select), and say to the public, “Help us, you, to indulge the wish of our poor brethren; you perceive they *want* to be off. God forbid *we* should ship them away, save with their cordial concurrence!” [original emphasis] (140)

The implication is, again, that the British are disguising – and succeeding in disguising – their intention of destroying the Irish people on the pretence of relieving them. In view of various statements made by the leading officials at the Treasury regarding the consequences of the Poor Law, it is difficult to discredit Mitchel’s accusations offhand. For example, having refused a request for financial aid to some of the distressed unions in September 1848, Trevelyan wrote to Twisleton:

I do not know how farms are to be consolidated if small farmers do not emigrate, and by acting for the purpose of keeping them at home, we should be defaulting at our own object. We must not complain of what we really want to obtain.

Charles Wood emphasized the importance of perseverance in collecting the rates because “the pressure will lead to some emigration” and, he added, “what we really want to obtain is a clearance of small farmers.”⁸⁹ Mitchel’s final verdict on the system of poor law relief is that

enacted under pretence of relieving the destitute, [it] was really intended ... to increase and deepen the pauperism of the country; to break down the farmers as well as the landlords by degrees, and uproot them gradually from the soil, so as to make the lands of Ireland pass (unencumbered by excessive population) into the hands of English capitalists, and under the more absolute sway of English government[,] ... the Poor Law ... is an elaborate machinery for making final conquest of Ireland by “law.”⁹⁰

Travelling to Galway in February 1847, Mitchel witnessed the devastation wrought by famine at first hand. The consequences of increasing large-scale evictions were by then evident, and Mitchel wrote that it “might have driven a wise man mad” to see

how assistant barristers and sheriffs, aided by the police, tore down the roof-trees and ploughed up the hearths of village after village – how the quarter-acre clause laid waste the parishes, how the farmers and their wives and little ones in wild dismay, trooped along the highways.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 315.

⁹⁰ *Nation*, 8 January 1848, quoted in P.S. O’Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 343.

⁹¹ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. xlviii.

An indication that men, wise or not, apparently were driven “mad” was the wave of assassinations in the last two months of 1847, when six landlords were killed. These murders received much publicity and were widely deplored and condemned on both sides of the Irish Sea. Although severely critical of landlords in general, and of their in many cases illegal expulsion of tenantry in particular, British public opinion could not condone retributive murders. As early as 1834, George Poulett Scrope had pointed out the connection between agrarian violence and landlord oppression. “It is impossible”, he wrote,

to have any doubt as to the real cause of the insurrectionary spirit and agrarian outrages of the Irish peasantry. They are the struggles of an oppressed starving people for existence! They are the rude efforts at obtaining a sort of savage self-established justice[.] ... They are the natural and necessary results of a state of law which allows the landlords of a country at one time to encourage an excessive growth of population on their estates, and at another, when caprice seizes them, to dispossess all this population, and turn them out on the highways without food and shelter.⁹²

In 1846, various British newspapers recognized the possibility that starving men could be driven to desperate acts when their last means of existence, their plot of land, was lost through eviction. In April, the *Times* noted that “murders are of daily occurrence”, but added that “so also are the causes of murder. The population is daily starving. Evictions are daily enforced.”⁹³ But after the 1847 assassinations, British sympathy with the starving and homeless began to fade away as newspapers fed their readers details of atrocities perpetrated by “the blood-stained ruffians of Ireland” and peddled the notion that the country was swarming with violent and lawless peasants. The *Times* expressed its firm belief that “the mass of the Celtic population in certain districts of Ireland take as much part in the maintenance of a savage code as the minority does in enforcing the law of the land.”⁹⁴ G.P. Scrope withdrew his earlier vindication of the peasantry, complaining that they were spreading “disaffection over the land, and endangering the public tranquillity” as well as “the security of property.”⁹⁵

The increasing demonization of the peasantry was concurrent with a gradual shift of sympathy towards the landlords who were now perceived to be under constant threat from vindictive tenants. Irish landlords and the administration

⁹² Quoted in Liz Curtis, *Nothing but the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (London: Information on Ireland, 1984), p. 50.

⁹³ *Times*, 18 April 1846.

⁹⁴ *Weekly Times*, 21 November 1846, *Times*, 10 November 1847, both quoted in de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, pp. 121, 120.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Edward G. Lengel, *The Irish Through British Eyes* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), p. 113.

in Dublin argued for introducing strict disciplinary measures to protect life and property. The Earl of Clarendon, who was appointed Lord Lieutenant in May 1847, was greatly alarmed at “the widely extended ... conspiracy for shooting landlords and agents” and feared that “the flame which now rages in certain districts will become a general conflagration.”⁹⁶ He was convinced that, if escalated violence was to be prevented, coercive measures had to take precedence over any attempts at conciliation through remedial measures such as a landlord-tenant bill. His conviction was shared by many members of Parliament and by Russell’s cabinet who felt that any concession to tenant right would entail interference with the rights of property and was, therefore, out of the question. Russell himself, on the other hand, insisted that coercion alone was not the answer. “It is quite true,” he wrote to Clarendon on 10 November,

that landlords in England would not bear to be shot like hares or partridges by miscreants banded for murderous purposes. But neither does any landlord in England turn out fifty persons at once, and burn their homes over their heads, giving them no provision for the future. The murders are atrocious, but so are the ejectments. The truth is that a civil war between landlords and tenants has been raging for 80 years, marked by barbarity on both sides. I am willing to finish the contest ... [b]ut if stringent laws are required, they must bear on both sides in the contest.⁹⁷

Although Russell stressed that coercion would have to be accompanied by some measure for curbing wholesale evictions, the Crimes and Outrages Bill was passed with large majorities in both houses of Parliament during the 1847 emergency session. Aided by some MPs and cabinet ministers who shared his view that “some security and some provision” had to be given to “the miserable cottiers who are now treated as brute beasts”, and encouraged by the fact that the British press was re-focusing attention on clearances in the early months of 1848, Russell forged ahead and eventually introduced the Evicted Destitute Poor Bill. The bill was passed in the Commons but met with considerable resistance in the Lords, where some Irish proprietors, notably Lord Monteagle, suggested certain amendments which, when carried, served to weaken the original bill to such an extent that, according to Peter Gray, it “had only a marginal effect in softening the blow of eviction.”⁹⁸

After the murder of Major Denis Mahon of Strokestown, County Roscommon, on 2 November 1847 – an event which brought the question of coercion

⁹⁶ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 325.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 184.

⁹⁸ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 192, 194. In this paragraph, I have drawn heavily on Gray’s book, pp. 178-96.

to a head by prompting Clarendon to ask for restrictive legislation eight days later – the *Cork Examiner* commented on the escalating “agrarian war” and its link with the absence of any form of tenant right:

The murderous “clearances” of landlords – the still more bloody “clearances” of landlords wrought by peasants – alike proclaim the necessity of legislative interference to put an end to such criminal mutual extermination. One day we record the havoc of the landlords of West Carbery, the next we are called upon to record the havoc of the peasants of Roscommon! Where is all this to end? ⁹⁹

If the British press gave vent to its abhorrence of landlords being murdered, there was also severe criticism of Russell’s ministry for failing to initiate legislation for the protection of tenants. While the *Illustrated London News* acknowledged the propriety of the Crimes and Outrages bill “to defend the Irish landlords from the murderous revenge of their exasperated tenants”, it also argued that, in the name of justice, “a bill should now be passed to protect defenceless tenants from the equally murderous clearances of tyrannical landlords.”¹⁰⁰ Remonstrances such as this followed in the wake of a number of illegal and particularly cruel evictions in 1847-48. Starting shortly before Christmas 1847, John Walsh evicted some eighty families from one village on his estate in the Mullet peninsula in County Mayo and had their houses pulled down. The dispossessed sought refuge in the auxiliary workhouse at Binghamstown, thirty miles away, but according to the Poor Law inspector, Richard Hamilton, they were too numerous to be admitted. He estimated that about fifty of them had lost their lives as a consequence of the evictions, while the rest were huddled “under the ditches [or] begging shelter from house to house, and plundering whatever they could lay their hands on.” Hamilton recommended legal action against Mr Walsh (who had failed to pay the poor rates for two years in a row), but no such action was taken.¹⁰¹ James Hack Tuke, who was visiting the Mullet area at the time, described the Walsh evictions and the destruction wrought on the estate in some detail. He was horrified by what he had witnessed and deplored the fact that such outrages were tolerated:

I cannot[,] ... while pitying the impoverished landlord, justify his course of proceeding towards his tenants; and if the primary duty of a good Govern-

⁹⁹ *Cork Examiner*, 5 November 1847.

¹⁰⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 1 April 1848.

¹⁰¹ Tom Yager, “Mass eviction in the Mullett Peninsula during and after the Great Famine”, *Irish Economic and Social History*, XXIII (1996), pp. 22-44 [30-32]; Sean P. McManamon, “Landlords and evictions in County Mayo during the Great Famine”, *Cathair Na Mart* 18 (1998), pp. 125-34 [129].

ment be the protection of life and property, is not legislative interference called for to prevent the misery, disease and death, which are inseparable from these wholesale evictions? ¹⁰²

The evictions on the Blake estate in County Galway in December 1847 became a matter of debate in Parliament. Sir Robert Peel relayed the account given by the district Poor Law inspector which stated that the occupiers and their families were forced out on New Year's Eve, their cabins were destroyed and several of the evicted died from exposure. Peel concluded that it appeared "from the evidence recorded that the forcible ejectments were illegal, that previous notices had not been served, and that the ejectments were perpetrated under circumstances of great cruelty."¹⁰³ In response to MPs protesting against Mr Blake's proceedings, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, conceded that unjust treatment allowed for the tenants to take civil action, but that evicting landlords were not "open to any criminal proceedings on the part of the government." Archbishop MacHale expressed his anger that there were no signs of "any prospective measures which would check the repetition of such cruelties" and that the chief concern of the government seemed to be the rights of property rather than "the people's suffering." Russell, who was struggling to convince his cabinet of the necessity for curtailing evictions, told Clarendon that "the murders of poor cottier tenants are too horrible to bear, and if we put down assassins, we ought to put down the lynch law of the landlord."¹⁰⁴ It is interesting to compare Russell's statement with one made by Mitchel around the same time. Addressing the small farmers of Ireland in his *United Irishman*, Mitchel thundered:

Ejectment in Ireland at present – ejectment for any cause – *means murder*. The ejecting landlord is a Thug, – the sheriff and the bailiffs are accomplices, – the Assistant Barrister is an accessory before the fact. But you have no "law" to punish *this* kind of agrarian outrage. The "laws" ... are all on the other side. [original emphasis] ¹⁰⁵

While Russell and Mitchel agreed that eviction equals murder, they differed on how to protect cottiers and small farmers from being thus murdered. Mitchel urged the people to protect themselves by forming voluntary defence associations and, if necessary, arming themselves, since justice apparently was not

¹⁰² Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰³ Quoted in T.P. O'Connor, *The Parnell Movement* (London: Keagan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886), p. 101.

¹⁰⁴ Grey, MacHale and Russell all quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 114-15.

¹⁰⁵ *United Irishman*, 4 March 1848, quoted in O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 356.

forthcoming through legal channels. Even though he was very likely aware of Russell's attempt to force through an effective pro-tenant measure, he doubted the Prime Minister's *will* to do so, claiming that Russell "was but too happy to comply with the demand" for coercion (150). In view of Russell's frustrated efforts in this matter, Mitchel's judgement is perhaps too harsh. But as far as he could see, the Crimes and Outrages bill only went to confirm that Irish landlords were conspiring with the government to rid the country of its "surplus" population". He also believed that the bill would serve to inflame landlord-tenant relations further, and that the tillers of the soil would finally recognize "the plot" for what it was. In a speech to the Irish Confederation in December 1847, Mitchel said:

I denounce this bill because it never can answer its end; because it will aggravate all the evils and exasperate all the fierce passions of the several classes against one another; because the peasantry who already feel that the world is not their friend, nor the world's law, will believe this measure to be a conspiracy against them between hostile landlords and a hostile government.¹⁰⁶

He was right about the bill not answering its purpose. There was only a slight decline in violent crimes during 1848, and they increased again in the following year.¹⁰⁷ Whether or not the peasantry in general entertained the notion of a conspiracy against them is difficult to determine since practically no testimonies were left by them. But contemporary accounts, which reflect something of what these people thought and felt, together with some of the testimonies given to the Irish Folklore Commission in the nineteen-forties, suggest that local landlords and/or their agents were often the objects of resentment and blame. For example, an informant from County Limerick said that after the landlord Wyndham Goold had evicted "some forty tenants" on his estate,

six women proceeded to the riverbank bringing the last ashes of the fires of their wrecked homes. These ashes they threw into the flowing water while on their knees they called down dire maledictions on landlord and agent.¹⁰⁸

According to the brothers Ó Néill from County Clare, Lord George Quinn "cleared out several families in the townland of Ballymorris, for non-payment of rent[.] ... The general attitude of the local landlords was cold and merciless."¹⁰⁹ An informant from County Galway told of Roddy Kiely, "a most severe agent for Blakes of Carraroe", who once "summoned a hungry man for pulling

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 339-40.

¹⁰⁷ Eiriksson, "Food Supply and Food Riots", in Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), pp. 242-43.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

a turnip. Local people killed and tarred cattle on Roddy from time to time in revenge.”¹¹⁰

The ratification of the coercion bill was, for Mitchel, the ultimate proof of the “deadly alliance” between landlords and legislators which, he claimed, was evident already in the report of the Devon Commission. In a letter to the editor of the *Nation* in January 1848, he argued that the people of Ireland must be made aware that “the infamous Bill” was nothing but “an engine to crush Tenant-Right ... and to enable the landlords to eject, distrain and exterminate in peace and security.”¹¹¹ In May, he addressed the Protestant farmers of the North in the pages of the *United Irishman*, urging them to join the nationalist cause and denouncing the “rotten and hideous thing” which was consorting with and upheld by “British oligarchy”, namely Irish landlordism:

“Irish noblemen and gentlemen” no longer recognize Ireland for their country – they are “Britons”; their *interests* are all British. British “laws” eject and distrain for them; British troops preserve “life and property,” and chase their surplus tenants. For them judges charge – for them hangmen strangle. Without British Government they are nothing. [original emphasis] ¹¹²

This harangue amounts to an unequivocal indictment of the landlords as a class, the implication being that Irish landlords are as great an enemy of Ireland as the British government, but in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* he betrays a tendency to modify his views. There are still accusations and severe criticisms, yet in several instances, these are offset by comments suggesting that it is not necessarily his intention to represent the entire class as predatory. “Irish landlords are not all monsters of cruelty”, he writes:

The resident landlords and their families did, in many cases, devote themselves to the task of saving their poor people alive. Many remitted their rents, or half their rents; and ladies kept their servants busy and their kitchens smoking with continual preparation of food for the poor. (115)

Some twenty pages later, Mitchel the accuser comes to the fore again. Starting with the concession that “[m]any of them were good and just men”, he proceeds to denounce “the vast majority” for being “fully identified in interest with the British Government” and desiring “nothing so much as to destroy the population” (142). Yet in the end, he practically overturns the whole conspiracy theory when he attacks the poor law relief system. He admits that, since the landlords were “already encumbered by debt, the pressure of the poor rates was

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

¹¹¹ Quoted in O’Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 342.

¹¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 358.

fast breaking them down” and that “[i]n most cases, they were not so much as the receivers of their own rents” (212). So were they then facing ruin because of a system which they themselves had “conspired” to create and uphold? Mitchel explains it thus:

They may have felt, indeed, that they were themselves both injured and insulted by the whole system of English legislation; but they would submit to anything rather than fraternize with the injured Catholic Celts. (142-43)

So his claim that landlords conspired with the British government is surely incompatible with the implication that they had to *submit* to paying the poor rates as stipulated by the Poor Law, enacted by that same government.

Sporadically evident in Mitchel’s text, contradictions and vacillations such as the above raise the question of whether he really was as hostile to landlords as his statement that “[t]here were not half enough of them shot” (67) would suggest. In the introduction to the new edition of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, Patrick Maume claims, with reference to this statement, that Mitchel “supported assassination” since his text “repeatedly defends the shooting of landlords and agents as a natural and legitimate response to eviction.”¹¹³ I have found only two other references to the killing of landlords or agents, neither of which I think can be read as explicitly supporting it. A consequence of the “extermination of tenantry”, Mitchel writes, had been “a few murders of landlords and agents” because “amongst the myriads of desperate men who then wandered houseless, there were some who would not die tamely.” He considers such a reaction “the most natural and inevitable thing in the world (98, 150). In saying so, he is surely no more supportive of assassination than contemporaries who expressed their understanding of the fundamental causes of agrarian violence, nor does he insinuate that murder is a “legitimate response” on the part of the peasants. Claiming that the impulse to murder a landlord was “natural”, even to an evicted and starving peasant, is surely an exaggeration. But given the documented cruelty of many evictions and the dreadful situation of the dispossessed, there is no reason to doubt that, in a number of cases, these murders were inevitable. The urge to shoot landlords also overcame some people who were witnesses to, but not victims of clearances. The numerous reports of Captain Kennedy, for instance, reflect his despair of alleviating the immense misery caused by mass evictions in the Kilrush union in 1848-49. In May 1849, he wrote:

¹¹³ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), p. xxv.

The general state of the Union causes me serious anxiety and pain[.] ... I find that my constant and untiring exertions make but little impression upon the mass of fearful suffering. As soon as one horde of houseless, and all but naked paupers are dead, or provided for in the workhouse, another wholesale eviction doubles the number who, in their turn, pass through the same ordeal of wandering from house to house, or burrowing in bogs or behind ditches till, broken down by privation and exposure to the elements, they seek the workhouse or die by the roadside.¹¹⁴

Recalling this wretchedness many years later, he confessed that “there were days ... when I came back from some scene of eviction so maddened by the sights of hunger and misery I had seen in the day’s work, that I felt disposed to take the gun from behind my door and shoot the first landlord I met.”¹¹⁵ A similar spontaneous, angry reaction to what he may have seen of destructive and cruel clearances very likely prompted Mitchel’s brutal statement that not enough landlords were shot. There is a great deal in *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, as well as in his other writings, that testifies to his hostility to the men of property, but nothing that clearly suggests that they ought to be assassinated.

Mitchel’s writings also reveal that his hostile attitude must in no small part have derived from his disappointment with the majority of Irish landlords for failing to support the national movement. Like most other Repealers and Young Irelanders, he was hoping to persuade them that the British relief measures would eventually ruin them and that, for the sake of all Irishmen, it was imperative to put an end to British rule in Ireland. Already in October 1845, he sounded a note of warning:

One word to the landlords. Do they, or can they, expect that during the ensuing season their tenants, who find it hard in ordinary years to pay their rent and *live*, will be able to meet them at the gale days as usual?... Once and for all, let some effective and simultaneous step be taken by the landed proprietors of this island, such as may convince the terrified people that they are not watched over by enemies, and *set* by beasts of prey – or, Irish landlordism has reached its latter days, and will shortly be with the feudal system and other *effete* institutions, in its grave. [original emphasis]¹¹⁶

In January 1847, there was an attempt to take some “effective step” when, on the initiative of Daniel O’Connell, a meeting of Irish peers, MPs, landowners

¹¹⁴ [Arthur Edward Kennedy], Reports and Returns Relating to the Evictions in the Kilrush Union, 1847-1849. http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/kr_evictions/kr_evictions_extracts.htm (22 February 2009).

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 369.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), p. 185.

and professional men was called in Dublin. It was hoped that this assembly would serve to unite all classes in the effort to devise a clear strategy for dealing with the famine disaster. The results of the meeting were promising as relative agreement was reached on what should be demanded of the government in the way of further relief measures. Although no definite proposals for legislation were as yet put forward, it was agreed that tenants ought to have a right to compensation for any improvements they had undertaken when giving up their land, whether voluntarily or through eviction. But as it turned out, there were too many political differences and conflicting class interests for a coherent “Irish Party” to be realizable. During the 1847 parliamentary session, Irish MPs split irrevocably over issues of relief and, by forcing through the Gregory clause as a part of the Amended Poor Law, the landlords reaffirmed their hostility to tenant right.¹¹⁷ Mitchel was sorely disappointed, but he kept hoping that they would see sense. “I do think it is still in the power of the aristocracy to save this nation and themselves at the same time”, he wrote to William Smith O’Brien in April, “[a]nd I wish and pray earnestly that they may find it in their heart to do so.”¹¹⁸ Several times during the following months, in speeches and in the pages of the *Nation*, he appealed to the landlords to make common cause with the nationalists, but all in vain. The Coercion Bill finally caused him to lose his last vestiges of faith in them. Speaking in the meeting of the Irish Confederation on 2 February 1848, he said:

I would this night give my right hand to bring about a combination of the various orders of Irishmen against English dominion. I do believe such a union would be the salvation of all those classes, of social order, and of many thousands of human lives. But, I tell you, I despair of such a combination[.] ... Have we all been dreaming these last few months? Is it a fact, or not, that the Irish gentry have called in the aid of foreigners to help them clear their own people from the face of the earth, to help them crush and trample down, in blood and horror, the rightful claim of the tenant classes to a bare subsistence on the land they till? ... They got what they wanted, a bill to disarm and transport the Irish – and where is their nationality now? ... They cheated me – they cheated you – and they are now laughing at us all.¹¹⁹

The cowardice and treachery that Mitchel read into the landlords’ call for coercive measures and their refusal to challenge British dominion in Ireland fuelled his bitterness and turned what might have been merely a hostile atti-

¹¹⁷ For a detailed account of the Irish Party, see Kevin B. Nowlan, “The Political Background”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 154-69.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel*, vol. 1, p. 157.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

tude into a charge of conspiracy. Although there is no evidence to support that charge, it is not surprising that it should have surfaced during the terrible years of famine. For decades, Irish landlords had been subject to harsh criticism by moulders of public opinion – writers, politicians, journalists, travellers – Irish as well as foreign. In a sermon composed in the early seventeen-thirties, Jonathan Swift wrote: “A great Cause of this Nation’s Misery, is that Ægyptian Bondage of cruel, oppressing, covetous Landlords, expecting that all who live under them should *make Bricks without Straw*” [original emphasis].¹²⁰ In a pamphlet written a decade earlier, he accused landlords of “*screwing and racking their Tenants*” to such an extent that the people had been reduced to “a worse Condition than the Peasants in France, or the Vassals in Germany and Poland” [original emphasis].¹²¹ Swift’s opinion was echoed in 1843 by the German traveller J. G. Kohl who found that the Irish landlords compared unfavourably to the great proprietors of Poland and Russia “who at least build houses for their peasants, and furnish them with food in times of famine.”¹²² Writing in 1779, Arthur Young explained that the Irish landlord is “a sort of despot” who has been brought into “a habit of exerting a very lofty superiority” through “a long series of oppressions, aided by very many ill-judged laws”¹²³, and in 1812, the poet P.B. Shelley expressed his regret that “the very poor people are infamously oppressed by the weight of burden which the superior ranks lay upon their shoulders.”¹²⁴ Pre-famine writers of fiction also provided some unflattering pictures of landlords, representing them as irresponsible, rapacious and heartless. Maria Edgeworth’s novel *Castle Rackrent* and William Carleton’s story “Tubber Derg”, for example, reveal the critical attitude of their authors. Yet it was not until the Famine years that the notion of conspiracy was articulated, and then not only by Mitchel. Already in 1833, when a partial failure of the potato crop caused severe distress particularly in County Mayo, Archbishop MacHale railed against

that hateful code of laws, which enables unfeeling landlords, who may have nought of humanity but the form, to seize the entire produce of the tenants’ labour, and to fling them, without food or raiment on the mercy of society.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ McMinn (ed.), *Swift’s Irish Pamphlets*, p. 155.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹²² Quoted in Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 291.

¹²³ Quoted in John O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847 [1875]* (Dublin: Veritas, 1989), p. 23.

¹²⁴ P.B. Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People* [1812] (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890), p. 6.

¹²⁵ Quoted in James Carty (ed.), *Ireland from Grattan’s Parliament to the Great Famine* (Dublin: C.J. Fallon, 1949), p. 163.

Although repeatedly criticized as oppressive ever since the early years of the Union, this code of laws was still in force in 1846. For MacHale, as for Mitchel, this fact spelled conspiracy. By the end of the year, he saw fit to ascribe the misery then prevailing among the poor to “a systematic collusion between the Irish landlords and the English legislature.”¹²⁶ What MacHale and Mitchel both seemed to disregard was the fact that Irish landlords were held in very low esteem by both the British public and many British politicians. They were accused of irresponsibility and neglect and loudly criticized for what was seen as their inexcusable tendency to beg from the government. Meanwhile, the landlords – and many other Irishmen, including Mitchel – argued that the Poor Law would be ruinous to the country as a whole. They also held that famine relief in Ireland should be regarded in the same way as in Scotland or Wales, that is, as a fiscal responsibility of the United Kingdom. Such opposites make for strange bedfellows in a conspiracy. Poulett Scrope, himself no mean critic of both government and landlords, read the situation as it most likely was. “The truth is”, he wrote in 1848, “that each party, the Government and the landlords, when the pressure came, were for shifting the onus on each other. And between the two, *the people starved*” [original emphasis].¹²⁷

There is no mistaking Mitchel’s antipathy to Irish landlords, but I think it can be defended to a certain extent. As I have tried to show, during the famine years it was fed by his aversion to their treatment of the poor, which admittedly was abominable and indefensible in many cases where their own self-preservation and the concern to maintain a comfortable lifestyle took precedence over the duty to save a dependent, starving population from extinction. It is also understandable that their apparent siding with “the enemy” rankled with Mitchel who, albeit naïvely, entertained the dream of a united Ireland administering the death-blow to the hated Union. But his apparent reluctance to blame all landlords and his view of their power as a mere extension of the power of the British government suggest that he considered the main culprit for the preservation of landlordism in Ireland to be that government. The landlords were to be chastised for dancing to the government’s pipe, but they eventually paid the price:

[T]he landlords were gradually broken and impoverished by the pressure of the rates, until the beneficent “Encumbered Estates Bill” had to come in and solve their difficulties – a great stroke of British policy, whereby it was hoped (now that the tenantry were cleared to the proper point) to clear out the landlords, too, and replace them with English and Scottish purchasers.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 244.

¹²⁷ Scrope, *The Irish Relief Measures, Past and Future*, p. 55.

¹²⁸ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. lii.

By getting rid of some of the troublesome old supplicants and replacing them with new proprietors who, according to Mitchel, were even more oppressive than the old, the British perpetuated the institution of landlordism, made sure that the spectre of tenant right was kept at bay, and thus strengthened British rule in Ireland. "The result to Ireland is simply this", Mitchel wrote, that

about one-fifteenth part of the island has changed hands; has gone from one landlord and come to another landlord: the result to the great tenant class is simply nil. The new landlord comes over them with the power of life and death, like his predecessor: but he has no local or personal attachment which in some cases used to mitigate the severity of landlord rule. (214)

He does not regret the passing of part of the old landlord class, but neither does he rejoice in it. He represents the majority of them as oppressors of their tenants, but also as dupes and, eventually, victims of the government's relief policies. His censure of them, I would argue, was no harsher than that of his contemporaries, including British public opinion. The most venomous criticism Mitchel felt compelled to offer was, justifiably or not, reserved for the British government.

But what of *The Last Conquest of Ireland* as an account of *famine*? How does it convey the hardship and the suffering of the victims? Because Mitchel's main concern is to expose the perceived evil designs of the British government, his focus is on the politics of the event. He appropriates the Famine to advance his own political agenda, with the result that the human aspects of the catastrophe are pushed into the background. In Mitchel's text, the chief victim is Ireland as a political entity. The suffering peasantry mostly appear as a secondary indicator of the country's subjugation by the "Empire of Hell." But Mitchel is perfectly aware of the emotional appeal of victimhood, and he does not fail to make use of it. "The details of this frightful famine ... I need not narrate", he states, because "they are sufficiently known" (117). Contrary to this protestation, however, the main narrative of the "British Famine" is sporadically interrupted by references to its devastating consequences. He condemns the public works for being unproductive, corruptive and demoralizing and, therefore, useless as a form of relief. In his view, they are nothing less than a government strategy by which "the *next* year's famine was ensured" (120; original emphasis). At the same time, he forges a link of causality between this "relief" and forced emigration, madness, cannibalism and death:

Now began to be a rage for extermination beyond any former time; and many thousands of peasants, who could still scrape the means, fled to the sea, as if pursued by wild beasts, and betook themselves to America[,] ...

and insane mothers began to eat their young children, who died of famine before them.

In order to intensify the effect of this awful picture, Mitchel juxtaposes it to the anomaly of food being exported under such circumstances: “And still fleets of ships were sailing with every tide, carrying Irish cattle and corn to England” (120-21). Thus he uses the famine mainly to support his contention that British policies drove people to commit atrocities which would have been unthinkable a few years earlier and exacerbated the suffering rather than relieved it.

A further example of Mitchel’s rhetorical exploitation of famine appears in his description of its victims in Galway in 1847. Despite a previous assertion that “[i]t would be easy to horrify the reader with details of this misery” but that “[i]magination must fill up the appalling picture” (128), the reader’s imagination is here made redundant by the author’s recollection of what he saw:

[C]owering wretches, almost naked in the savage weather, prowling in turnip-fields, and endeavouring to grub up roots which had been left[,] ... groups and families, sitting or wandering on the high-road, with failing steps and dim, patient eyes, gazing hopelessly into infinite darkness; before them, around them, above them, nothing but darkness and despair. (147)

As Chris Morash has remarked, this is indeed “a powerful representation of human suffering.”¹²⁹ But it appears in a chapter dealing with the nationalist failure to win an election and the causes of that failure, that is, bribery and the resistance of the landed gentry. Thus the famine itself is again overshadowed by political concerns; the failed election is the prime indicator of a country subjugated, while the fact of the starving peasantry is peripheral. The latter part of the passage describing famine in Galway confirms that the reader’s imagination is in no great demand, and we are again reminded that the cause of all the misery must be sought – and will be found – in Westminster:

Around those farm-houses which were still inhabited were to be seen hardly any stacks of grain; it was all gone ... and sometimes, I could see, in front of the cottages, little children leaning against a fence when the sun shone out, – for they could not stand, – their limbs fleshless, their bodies half-naked, their faces bloated yet wrinkled, and of a pale, greenish hue, – children who would never, it was too plain, grow up to be men and women. I saw Trevelyan’s claw in the vitals of those children: his red tape would draw them to death: in his Government laboratory he had prepared for them his typhus poison. (148)

¹²⁹ Chris Morash, “Literature, Memory, Atrocity”, in Morash and Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities*, pp. 110-18 [115].

Here, Mitchel employs the conventions of the Gothic to emphasize the horrible appearance of the famine victims. The fleshless limbs, the bloated and wrinkled faces and their greenish hue conjure up an image of the living dead, and the fact that these particular living dead are children intensifies the horror of the image. But the Gothic also provides metaphors by which Mitchel reinforces his assertion that all blame for the famine must attach to the government. Thus Trevelyan becomes the vampire-parasite and the mad scientist whose disgusting shape embodies all the power of a government bent on exterminating the Irish people. Sean Ryder has noted that certain discursive forms, such as the Gothic and the sentimental tale, are characterized by affectivity: “They are narrative forms which are intended to perform things rather than simply reflect reality in some transparent way.”¹³⁰ This is exactly why Mitchel recognized the potential of the Gothic for his version of the Famine, whether in reference to the victims or to those he held responsible for victimizing them.

Many of Mitchel’s contemporaries also incorporated Gothic features in their descriptions of the ravages of famine. For example, in Carrickmacross, County Monaghan, the American traveller William Balch encountered

an old man, a complete skeleton, doubled together, his chin resting on his knees, with his fleshless legs and arms exposed to view. As we passed him, he turned upon us a deathly stare[.] ... His hollow cheeks, projecting jaws, eye-balls sunken deep in their sockets - oh horror[,] ... the image of Death doubled together!¹³¹

Dr Daniel Donovan of Skibbereen described what he found in a hut adjacent to the graveyard. “[T]his hut”, he wrote,

is surrounded by a rampart of human bones, which have accumulated to such a height that the threshold ... is now two feet beneath [the ground]. In this horrible den, in the midst of a mass of human putrefaction, six individuals, males and females, labouring under most malignant fever, were huddled together, as closely as were the dead in the graves around[.] ... At the time ... it was blowing a perfect hurricane, and such groans of roaring wind and rain I never remember to have heard [.] ... I was completely unnerved[;] ... six fellow creatures were almost buried alive in this filthy sepulchre.¹³²

¹³⁰ Sean Ryder, “Reading Lessons: Famine and the *Nation*, 1845-1849”, in Morash and Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities*, pp. 151-63 [160].

¹³¹ William Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It* (New York: Putnam, 1850), p. 411.

¹³² Quoted in “Sketches in the West of Ireland”, *Illustrated London News*, 13 February 1847. The quote was accompanied by James Mahony’s sketch of the hut reproduced here.



THE HUT OR WATCH-HOUSE IN THE OLD CHAPEL YARD.

In July 1847, the parish priest of Kilglass, County Roscommon, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Freeman*, saying that his parishioners were dying fast of fever:

The poor creatures are wasting away and dying of want. In very many instances the dead bodies are thrown in waste cabins and dykes and are devoured by dogs. In some parts the fields are bleached with the bones of the dead that were previously picked by dogs.¹³³

As Robert Smart has noted, “the Gothic became the only narrative mode that could truly capture the realities of the Famine’s destruction.”¹³⁴ Yet the writers of accounts such as the above often worried that their language was unequal to the task of expressing what they witnessed. Perhaps one reason for their unease was the knowledge that they were relying on a form of fiction to impart a terrible reality in putatively factual narratives. For, as William Carleton reminded his readers, “the strongest imagery of Fiction is frequently transcended by the terrible realities of Truth.”¹³⁵ *The Last Conquest of Ireland* betrays no such doubt about the

¹³³ Quoted in John Killen, *The Famine Decade: Contemporary Accounts, 1841-1851* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995), p. 148.

¹³⁴ Robert Smart, *Black Roads: The Famine in Irish Literature* (Ireland’s Great Hunger Museum / Quinipiac University Press, 2015), p. 8.

¹³⁵ William Carleton, *The Black Prophet* (London: Simms and M’Intyre, 1848), p. iii.

adequacy of language, and Mitchel's vivid descriptions and firm opinions became deeply embedded in cultural memory, so feeding in to new historical phases.

1.2. Historiography in transition: the Mitchel legacy

The nationalist reading of Famine history as represented by Mitchel was in essence sustained by later nineteenth century writers. The most widely read and influential among these was Canon John O'Rourke's *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*, which appeared in 1875. His account was based largely on contemporary testimony such as interviews with survivors, information based on query-sheets sent out to doctors and clergymen around the country as well as other readily available contemporary accounts. It also drew heavily from the nationalist press, in which the spirit of Mitchel loomed large, and the question of food exports was as essential for O'Rourke as it had been for Mitchel. In the second chapter of his book, O'Rourke introduced the subject by quoting a clergyman writing from Kells in October 1845:

With starvation at our doors, grimly staring us [*sic*], vessels laden with our whole hopes of existence, our provisions, are hourly wafted from our every port. From one milling establishment I have last night seen no less than fifty dray-loads of meal moving to Drogheda, thence go to feed the foreigner, leaving starvation and death the soon and certain fate of the toil and the sweat that raised this food.¹³⁶

O'Rourke also quoted extensively from the resolutions of the Mansion House Committee which met in November 1845.¹³⁷ These resolutions were based on hundreds of letters received from all over the country testifying that the alarm caused by the partial failure of the potato crop of that year was by no means unfounded. With reference to these letters, the Committee emphasized the necessity of government intervention in the impending crisis in rather strong language, and it did not shrink from rebuking the government for withholding such intervention and for pursuing policies ostensibly harmful to Ireland. "Whilst the Irish harbours are closed against the importation of food," the Committee declared in Resolution 6,

they are left open for the exportation of Irish grain, an exportation which has already amounted in the present season to a quantity nearly adequate to feed the entire people of Ireland, and to avert the now certain famine;

¹³⁶ O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, pp. 30-31.

¹³⁷ The Committee, formed in 1821 to raise subscriptions for relief to distressed areas in Ireland, was reconvened by the Lord Mayor of Dublin in October 1845. Its members included the Duke of Leinster, Daniel O'Connell, Henry Grattan, and the Archbishop of Dublin.

thus inflicting upon the Irish people the abject misery of having their own provisions carried away to feed others, whilst they themselves are left contemptuously to starve.

The Committee opined that the ministry was “shrinking from their duty” and guilty of “the contemptuous disregard of the lives of the people of Ireland.”¹³⁸ O’Rourke finds the protests of the Committee fully justified and adds that “it will be found, in the course of this narrative, that the want of prompt vigorous action on the part of the Government ... had quite as much to do with the Famine as the failure of the potato crop itself.”¹³⁹

Like Mitchel, O’Rourke contended that the Famine was largely man-made, and for reasons very similar to those referred to by Mitchel. The governments of the period, Tory as well as Whig, are much criticized for their policies and their actions, or failures to act, as the case may be. The ministry of Sir Robert Peel, writes O’Rourke, dealt with the crisis in an “indefensible” manner; its policy “from first to last was a policy of delay – delay in a case in which delay was ruin.”¹⁴⁰ He is openly critical of the Russell government’s strict adherence to the principles of political economy in matters of relief, at the same time implying that the provisions of the Act of Union did not, in practice, include Ireland: “England could find a hundred million to spend in fighting the Grand Turk; she could find twenty million for the slave-owners of her colonies ... but a sufficient sum could not be afforded to save the lives of five million of her own subjects.”¹⁴¹ Although O’Rourke does not explicitly accuse Russell’s government of genocide, he admits that they “were painfully unequal to the situation” since they “either could not or would not use all the appliances within their reach, to save the Irish people.”¹⁴² And with reference to the infamous Gregory clause, he declares that “[a] more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed.”¹⁴³ He even goes so far as to use the words “extermination” and “willful murder”, although mostly indirectly when quoting from contemporary sources. By and large, O’Rourke’s work reiterates Mitchel’s views, thereby reinforcing the nationalist interpretation of the Famine.

In 1877, the journalist and politician A.M. Sullivan published a book entitled *New Ireland*, one chapter of which dealt with the Famine. Sullivan, a constitutional nationalist, began publishing a second series of the *Nation* together

¹³⁸ O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, p. 42.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

with Charles Gavan Duffy the year after the paper was suppressed in 1848, thereby contributing to the growth of the idea of nationalism in the public consciousness. His book *The Story of Ireland*, published in 1867, was a huge success, going through numerous editions as the most popular history book for several generations to come. Although an advocate of the concept of cultural nationalism as expounded by Thomas Davis, founder of the *Nation*, Sullivan, as a constitutional nationalist, could not embrace views as extreme as those of Mitchel. *The Story of Ireland* nevertheless exuded a rather marked Anglophobia, representing Ireland as a nation of patriots, saints and scholars downtrodden by the mighty and powerful England. But Sullivan had confidence in an eventual moral redress for Ireland which, as the historian Roy Foster has noted, he expressed through the representation of Irish history as “a self-enclosed liberation narrative[,] ... a story whose ending was pre-ordained, with separation from Britain as both a moral imperative and a historical inevitability.”¹⁴⁴ With reference to the Famine, Sullivan stated that, in 1846, “it became plain the government would let the people perish”, and there are echoes of Mitchel in Sullivan’s claim that “[t]here was food in abundance, but the government said it should not be touched, unless in accordance with the teachings of Adam Smith and the ‘laws of political economy.’” Nevertheless, most such statements were made in a rather impersonal, non-committal manner, suggesting a reluctance on the part of the writer to endorse any views he considered too radical or extreme. “The corn exported from Ireland that year”, he wrote, “would, alone, *it is computed*, have sufficed to feed a larger population” [emphasis added].¹⁴⁵

The tendency to steer clear of the Mitchelite interpretation of the Famine is apparent in Sullivan’s *New Ireland*, too. At the beginning of the chapter entitled “The Black Forty-Seven”, the author confesses to a certain apprehension in regard to the manner of representing the subject of the Famine in history-writing: “I know not whether the time has even yet arrived when the theme can be fairly treated, and when a calm and just apportionment of blame and merit attempted. To-day, full thirty years after the event, I tremble to contemplate it.”¹⁴⁶ In spite of this apprehension, Sullivan does criticize the government, but his language expresses none of the anger and irony so characteristic of Mitchel. “It would be utter injustice”, he writes, “to deny that the Government made exertions which judged by ordinary emergencies would be prompt and consid-

¹⁴⁴ R. F. Foster, *The Irish Story* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 25.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Helen Litton, “The Famine in Schools”, in Tom Hayden (ed.), *Irish Hunger* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1997), pp. 56-65 [61-62].

¹⁴⁶ A.M. Sullivan, *New Ireland*, vol. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1877), p. 122.

erable. But judged by the awful magnitude of the evil then at hand ... they were fatally tardy and inadequate.”¹⁴⁷ As for the government’s insistence on adhering to the principles of political economy, he remarks that “those doctrines were inapplicable in such a case. They had to be flung aside in 1847. Had they been discarded a year or two sooner a million of lives might have been saved.”¹⁴⁸ In spite of such criticisms, Sullivan’s account is characterized by a conciliatory tone indicating his inclination to mollify Mitchel’s accusations against the government and Irish landlords “In Ireland”, he remarks,

the burning memory of horrors which more prompt and competent action on the part of the ruling authorities might have considerably averted, seems to overwhelm all other recollection, and the noble generosity of the English people appears to be forgotten in a frenzy of reproach against the English Government of that day.¹⁴⁹

Sullivan is also careful to point out that not all landlords were evicting tenants and that many were ruined by the efforts to save their own tenants from starvation. Thus his perception of the conduct of the landed class is very much at variance with Mitchel’s conviction that most landlords wished to destroy the peasantry. Because of this tendency to consider the issue of culpability from various angles, thereby questioning the prevailing nationalist interpretation of events, Sullivan’s work can be seen as an early attempt at what later came to be termed revisionism. But as Roy Foster has noted, “it was too late; nobody read it.”¹⁵⁰

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Mitchel’s interpretation of the events of the Famine was echoed and more or less endorsed by political activists such as Michael Davitt, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa and James Connolly. Writing about the Famine in *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (1904), Davitt, too, refers to food exports, but he addresses the question from a perspective different from that of Mitchel:

There is possibly no chapter in the wide records of human suffering and wrong so full of shame ... as that which tells us of (it is estimated) a million of people ... lying down to die in a land out of which forty-five millions’ worth of food was being exported, in one year alone, for rent – the product of their own toil – and making no effort, combined or otherwise, to assert even the animal’s right to existence – the right to live by the necessities of its nature. ¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵⁰ Foster, *The Irish Story*, p. 57.

¹⁵¹ Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904), p. 47.

Thus Davitt focuses on the failure of the Irish to avert what he terms “an artificial famine” due to a lack of resistance. Although he makes no excuses for “England’s callous action” nor for “the lupine conduct of the Irish landlords”, he contends that the Irish people must shoulder part of the blame for the calamity because “the wholesale cowardice of the men who saw their wives and little ones sicken and die, and who ‘bravely paid their rent’ before dying themselves” meant that a substantial resistance was never even attempted.¹⁵²

But Davitt is also careful to point out that, in his opinion, the people were to blame only indirectly since the Catholic Church was firmly set against any kind of rebellious tendencies. “The altars thundered against the wickedness of Ribbonism”, he writes, “and proclaimed the general obligation of obeying magistrates and masters, as carrying authority from a divine source.”¹⁵³ With this criticism of the Church, Davitt follows Mitchel’s lead, even to the point of endorsing the latter’s indictment of the clergy: “Mitchel blames the priests, primarily, for persuading the people not to fight. Begging alms and making paupers of men they had already taught to be slaves was more in their line, and the taunt of Mitchel is only too well deserved.”¹⁵⁴ Since Davitt is here venting his disgust with the lack of resistance, he chooses to leave out a fact which Mitchel did point out: that the clergy generally did not fail the people in humanitarian terms, and that they helped the distressed as far as it was in their power. For Davitt, the apparent failure of the Church to fight for the survival of its people on the political arena and its repeated exhortations to patience and forbearance in the face of calamity was reason enough to pass judgment. “The responsibility for what followed”, he wrote, “— for the holocaust of humanity which landlordism and English rule exacted from Ireland in a pagan homage to an inhuman system — must be shared between the political and spiritual governors of the Irish people in those years of measureless national shame.”¹⁵⁵ In his criticism of landlords, Davitt is even harsher than Mitchel. He describes the landed class as “inhumanly selfish and base”, and although he admits that there were “a few exceptions to the general conduct of the mercenary horde”, he concludes that “these only bring into greater contrast the vulture propensities of the mass of Irish landowners of the time.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 49. “Ribbonism” refers to the activities of secret agrarian societies which “attempted to prevent the exploitation of tenant farmers ... [through] intimidation, the maiming of cattle, the burning of crops, and murder.” D.J.Hickey and J.E. Doherty, *A New Dictionary of Irish History from 1800* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2003), p. 419.

¹⁵⁴ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

To a certain extent, the hatred evident in Davitt's appraisal of Irish landlords probably springs from his personal experience of dispossession. In 1850, when he was barely five years old, his family was evicted from the homestead in County Mayo. The traumatic event left him very bitter. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa who, at the age of sixteen, witnessed the death of his father on the public works in 1847 and the subsequent eviction of the rest of his family the following year, was equally outspoken about his hatred of landlords. In his *Recollections*, published in 1898, he asks: "Didn't John Mitchel say that the mistake of it was that *more* landlords were not shot" [original emphasis]!¹⁵⁷ Rossa's account also gives an indication of how firmly the nationalist conception of Famine era food exports had been established by the end of the century. Rossa could claim that the food exported in 1845-47 would have sustained three times the population of Ireland if it had been allowed to stay in the country. He was so confident of this that he added, "what I say is historical truth, recorded in the statistics of the times."¹⁵⁸

James Connolly, the Irish labour leader, was equally vehement in regard to the food question. Writing in 1910, he stated that "there was food enough in the country [in 1848] to feed double the population were the laws of capitalist society set aside, and human rights elevated to their proper position." He concurred with Mitchel's dictum that the Almighty sent the potato blight but the English created the famine, but he also qualified this by adding that "England made the famine by a rigid application of the economic principles that lie at the base of capitalist society."¹⁵⁹ Therefore, he argued, unless the capitalist system with its "intellectual and social fetters" is rejected, one does not have "the right to denounce the English administration of Ireland during the famine as a colossal crime against the human race."¹⁶⁰ Connolly, then, did not endorse Mitchel's charge of genocide, and like Davitt, he laid part of the blame at the door of the Irish leaders since they, too, "stood for the rights of property and refused to abandon them even when they saw their consequences in the slaughter of over a million of the toilers."¹⁶¹

By the time the historian P.S. O'Hegarty's book *A History of Ireland under the Union* appeared in 1952, the nationalist interpretation of the Famine had evolved into what many Irishmen both at home and abroad perceived as the

¹⁵⁷ Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections* [1898] (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), pp. 115-16.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁵⁹ James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History* [1910] (London: Bookmarks, 1987), p. 131.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

truth. Thus in the chapter entitled “The Great Starvation”, O’Hegarty could claim with unflinching confidence that “[t]he facts about the calamity ... are fully established and are not disputed.”¹⁶² His account of the events of the Famine years indicates that what by this time had become nationalist doctrine was in essence the Mitchelite version. Like previous nationalist writers, O’Hegarty insists on exports being a major cause of starvation and death. Ireland, he claims, “was exporting at this very time more than enough food to feed all her population.”¹⁶³ He supports this claim by referring to contemporary sources such as the *Nation*, in which the voice of Mitchel was prominent from 1845 through 1847. But in quoting from the paper he forgets, or chooses to ignore, the fact that the *Nation* was not, and did not pretend to be, neutral and objective. Deploring the lack of Irish leadership, O’Hegarty points an accusing finger at the political as well as the spiritual leaders of the day, but his final indictment is nevertheless an echo of Mitchel’s. “In the known facts of this business”, he concludes, “there is justification for the view that the Government policy, under which over a million died, was a deliberate policy of extermination[.] ... Even if England be acquitted of deliberate policy in the matter, it cannot be acquitted of its responsibility for the fact.” Yet as O’Hegarty sees it, the “facts” do not allow for any acquittal since they indicate that

no Englishman, and no English statesman in particular, looked, in his heart, upon Ireland and the Irish, as any other than a conquered country and a subject, inferior people[.] ... The whole course of Government measures right through the crisis, deliberately or automatically it matters not, was inspired and directed towards Starvation, Depopulation, and Emigration, and was fully successful in all three directions.¹⁶⁴

O’Hegarty’s verdict thus corresponds perfectly to that of Mitchel.

1.2.1. ‘The direct stroke of an all-wise Providence’

The tendency among some nationalist writers to put the entire blame for the famine disaster on the British government basically arose from their analysis and interpretation of policy. Food exports, inadequate relief measures and ultimately destructive poor laws were seen as major factors in a process which ultimately led to “extermination.” Peter Gray has shown that British relief policies were greatly influenced by the doctrine of providentialism, which he defines as “the belief that all human affairs are regulated directly or indirectly by divine

¹⁶² O’Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 291.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

agency for human good.”¹⁶⁵ Not only politicians but also the English press and public resorted more and more to providentialist interpretations as the crisis deepened and the clamour for help from Ireland became ever louder. Although not all policy makers subscribed to this doctrine, it was prevalent among and often evoked by key figures within the government such as Charles Wood and Charles Trevelyan at the Treasury, and Sir James Graham and Sir George Grey, Home Secretaries serving under Peel and Russell respectively. Providentialist thinking added a moralist dimension to the ideology of *laissez-faire*, which favoured a minimum of government intervention in economic affairs. This combination of doctrines resulted in a “Christian political economy” in which emphasis was laid on the subjection of the individual to “the moral discipline of ‘the natural economic laws’ instituted by God.”¹⁶⁶ Because the Treasury held a central position in Famine-era policy making and all matters relating to relief funding had to be approved by it, providentialist ideology played a decisive role in the government’s handling of the crisis.

Charles Trevelyan, Assistant (and later Permanent) Secretary to the Treasury, held an unshakeable conviction that the famine was ordained by God as a punishment for indolence and dependence and that it was visited on the Irish in order to teach them a lesson. In his view, the calamity was not to be “too much mitigated” because dependence on others was “a moral disease” which had to be eliminated.¹⁶⁷ Trevelyan considered this “social evil” the primary obstacle to Irish prosperity, an obstacle which could be removed only by the exertions of the Irish themselves. Government intervention in the form of long-term relief would impede social improvement in Ireland because there, “[a]ll classes ‘make a poor mouth’[...] ... They conceal their advantages, exaggerate their difficulties, and relax their exertions.”¹⁶⁸ This subject is a recurring theme in Trevelyan’s correspondence and other writings. In a letter to Relief Commissioner Routh in February 1846, he insisted that “the greatest improvement of all which could take place in Ireland would be to teach the people to depend upon themselves for developing the resources of their country, instead of having recourse to the assistance of the government on every occasion.”¹⁶⁹ The statement indicates Trevelyan’s confidence in the possibilities afforded by expandable Irish resour-

¹⁶⁵ Peter Gray, “Ideology and the Famine”, in Pórtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 91.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁶⁷ See Jennifer Hart, “Sir Charles Trevelyan at the Treasury”, *The English Historical Review*, LXXV (1969), pp. 92-110 [99].

¹⁶⁸ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 139.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Colm Tóibín and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A documentary* (London: Profile Books, 2001), p. 70.

es while it also confirms the government's unwillingness to intervene. In October of the same year, Trevelyan received an angry letter from Lord Monteaigle, an Irish peer and landowner, accusing the government of pauperizing Ireland instead of repaying "a debt for the wrong of centuries ... by raising us above our present condition."¹⁷⁰ In a stern reply to this charge, Trevelyan assumed that

I need not remind your lordship that the ability even of the most powerful government is extremely limited in dealing with a social evil of this description. It forms no part of the functions of government to provide supplies of food or to increase the productive powers of the land.¹⁷¹

In 1847, at the height of the Famine when starvation and disease were rampant, deaths an everyday occurrence and the potato crop totally inadequate to alleviate hunger, Trevelyan saw fit to declare the crisis over. And indeed it was over as far as direct government intervention was concerned. "There is only one way", wrote Trevelyan, "in which the relief of the destitute ever has been, or ever will be, conducted consistently with the general welfare, and that is by *making it a local charge*" [original emphasis].¹⁷² The Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847 did exactly that, and henceforth, Irish property was to pay for Irish poverty. Trevelyan explained the principle of the amendment as being "that rate after rate should be levied *for the preservation of life*, until the landowners and farmers either enable the people to support themselves by honest industry, or dispose of their property to those who can and will perform this indispensable duty" [original emphasis].¹⁷³ Thus even in the face of the appalling conditions of "Black '47", Trevelyan pursued what he considered to be the only feasible solution to the problems besetting Ireland. Regarding the immediate problem of the famine, he appeared to have no misgivings as to the manner in which the crisis had thus far been managed by the government. In *The Irish Crisis*, he confidently asserted that "so far as the maladies of Ireland are traceable to political causes, nearly every practical remedy has been applied."¹⁷⁴ And once again, he emphasized the role of providence and the implications of the potato failure as a moral lesson to be well heeded:

posterity will trace up to that famine the commencement of a salutary revolution in the habits of a nation long singularly unfortunate, and will ac-

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in McManamon, "Landlords and Evictions in County Mayo during the Great Famine", p. 128.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Tóibín and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 71.

¹⁷² Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 136.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 119

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

knowledge that on this, as on many other occasions, Supreme Wisdom has educated permanent good out of transient evil.¹⁷⁵

Contemporary observers in Ireland were not as prone to underwrite the providence theory as the Treasury was. Sceptical voices were raised, not because of any doubt as to the existence of divine power, but because of an impression, and in some cases even a conviction, that the hand of God had less to do with the calamity than worldly authority. In his assessment of the Famine, Jonathan Pim of the Society of Friends questioned the propriety of and justification for accusing the Irish of idleness and improvidence. Pondering the causes for “the depressed condition of Ireland”, he suggested that it could have resulted from “injudicious legislation.” In his opinion, such legislation should be removed in order to leave “a free scope ... for human exertion”, because only then would it be “right to condemn the people for improvidence or want of industry.”¹⁷⁶ William Bennett, shaken by what he had witnessed during his journey in the west of Ireland in 1847 found it difficult to ascribe the misery he had seen to a divine source exclusively. “Thousands are not merely pining away in misery and wretchedness”, he wrote,

but are dying like cattle off the face of the earth, from want and its kindred horrors! Is this to be regarded in the light of a Divine dispensation and punishment? Before we can safely arrive at such a conclusion, we must be satisfied that human agency and legislation ... had no hand in it.¹⁷⁷

The American philanthropist Asenath Nicholson was even more vehement in her denunciation of the tendency to impute the ravages of famine to a divine source. In her decided opinion, there was no such thing as “God’s famine” in Ireland during those years — it was man-made. “God is slandered”, she thundered, “when it is called an unavoidable dispensation of His wise providence, to which we should all humbly bow, as a chastisement which could not be avoided.”¹⁷⁸

The providence theory, insofar as it appeared to exculpate the government by attributing the destruction wrought by famine to a higher power, was rejected by Irish nationalists. Mitchel’s assertion that the blight came from God but the famine was created by the English was recycled by many nationalist writers through the nineteen-twenties and beyond. For example, in his *Recollections*,

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁷⁶ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 110.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁷⁸ Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland* [1851], ed. Maureen Murphy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), p. 48.

O'Donovan Rossa referred to the Famine era as the time "when England allowed thousands of our people to starve and blasphemously charged God Almighty with the crime, while the routine of her misgovernment compelled the cereal produce of the country to be exported."¹⁷⁹ Canon O'Rourke called attention to the connection he perceived between British anti-Catholicism and certain manifestations of providentialist doctrine which held that the Irish were being punished for their stubborn adherence to idolatrous popery. But he also objected to the fact that providentialism was brought to bear on government policy in general and the granting of relief in particular. He agreed with William Bennett that "the responsibility of the Irish Famine should not be laid at the door of Divine Providence", especially not "without some investigation", and he referred to such a practice as a "blasphemous attack upon Divine Providence, so current at the time among politicians."¹⁸⁰ Michael Davitt used even stronger language when he condemned providentialism as a "hideous theory" on which thousands had been "murdered by starvation because of some inscrutable decree of the God of the poor." He concluded that "[n]o more horrible creed of atheistic blasphemy was ever preached to a Christian people."¹⁸¹ Davitt's sense of outrage stems in part from his belief that the Catholic Church was largely responsible for instilling "this moral poison", as he called it, into the souls of its people by preaching non-resistance and urging forbearance and acceptance of God's will.

Davitt was perhaps being too severe in his criticism of the Church, since he appears to disregard the change in attitude that began to surface among the clergy in late 1846. But in view of its response to the state of affairs during the first year of the crisis, there were certainly grounds for disapproval from a nationalist point of view. Initially, a majority of the Catholic clergy supported Russell's government and the hierarchy welcomed the return to power of the Whigs. This would account for the reluctance of the Church to quarrel with the government's relief policy or to criticize the implementation of it following the total failure of the potato crop in 1846. Because it was believed that Russell was the key to increased privileges for the Church and that his government would be generous to Ireland in matters of relief, it would be counter-productive to antagonize his ministry. As a result, the innumerable reports of distress and pleas for assistance addressed by the clergy to the authorities, either directly or through the press, were mainly uncritical. For example, in August 1846, Fr Theobald Mathew of Cork wrote to Trevelyan, commending him for his efforts

¹⁷⁹ O'Donovan Rossa, *Rossa's Recollections*, p. 196.

¹⁸⁰ O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*, p. 183.

¹⁸¹ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, p. 50.

to save the people from “the calamitous effects” of the previous season’s potato failure, adding that Trevelyan’s “wise precautions” had spared the country from destruction by famine. Fr Mathew then went on to describe how the re-appearance of the blight had laid waste the land and caused despair among the poor. This “tale of woe”, he pointed out, was not intended to trouble Trevelyan’s “benevolent feelings” but to “excite sympathy on behalf of our miserable peasantry” as “Divine providence, in its inscrutable ways” had once again “poured out upon us the vial of its wrath.”¹⁸² Fr Mathew thus expressed a belief in divine punishment while also implicitly trusting in the will and power of worldly agents to alleviate the consequences of the potato failure.

During the last few months of 1846 it was becoming evident that the public works as stipulated by the Labour Rate Act would not be successful in preventing general distress. Although 450,000 people were employed by December, there were still large numbers of destitute persons who could not get work and thus had no means of subsistence. Moreover, owing to rising food prices, the wages earned on the works were inadequate to keep starvation away from the doors of large families. Food depots were not opened until the end of the month, and they only sold food at market price. Consequently, many poor families were forced to survive on one scanty meal a day, if they were able to procure food at all. Parish priests found themselves increasingly unequal to the task of alleviating the suffering as their means of pecuniary assistance were extremely limited. From this time on, there was a perceptible change in the attitude of the clergy even though they still did not take a stand as a body. Individual priests began to question the providentialist interpretation of the famine and to criticize government relief policies. In Westport, County Mayo, a group of priests took issue with the ideology of free trade, declaring that “[w]e cannot sufficiently express our condemnation of the policy of the present government in their unnatural solicitude for the mercantile interests of this unfortunate country.”¹⁸³ Fr Mullins, writing from County Galway to protest the many deaths from starvation in his parish, asked: “How is all this desolation to be accounted for? Surely it was not caused by the visitation of an angry providence, but by the crying injustice of our earthly rulers.”¹⁸⁴ Such voices as these were raised more and more frequently as the situation in Ireland became increasingly desperate in the winter of 1847.

¹⁸² Quoted in Brendan Ó Cathaoir, *Famine Diary* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), p. 63.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Thomas P. O’Neill, “The Catholic Clergy and the Great Famine”, *Reportorium Novum*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1956), pp. 461-69 [464].

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Donal Kerr, *The Catholic Church and the Famine* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1996), p. 82.

The Catholic dignitaries, with a few exceptions such as the outspoken Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, were slower in openly denouncing the government's handling of the crisis. The first prelate to do so was actually the Irish-born Bishop of New York, John Hughes. In a lecture given in March 1847, he referred to the long history of British subjugation of Ireland, resulting in bad government and a defective social economy, as the chief deterrent to Irish prosperity. To these malignancies he attributed the, in his opinion, misguided practice of referring to the Irish as indolent, ignorant and uncivilized. He condemned the current principles of political economy because they valued property higher than man and because they made a mockery of the Union by operating "differently in two provinces of the same State." Finally, he refuted the notion of the famine as a visitation of God, saying that "I fear there is blasphemy in charging on the Almighty what is the result of his [man's] own doings."¹⁸⁵ The following year, the *Nation* endorsed Bishop Hughes's rejection of the providentialist explanation, thereby firmly establishing the nationalist standpoint on the subject. God was not to be held responsible for the consequences of the blight – the British government was the real culprit.

In October 1847, the Irish bishops were finally in sufficient agreement among themselves to draw up a memorial to be presented to the government through Lord Lieutenant Clarendon. Their text exhibits many similarities to that of Bishop Hughes. They attributed the causes of the famine to "the unjust and penal enactments which, in other days, deprived the great bulk of the people of the rights of property, thus discouraging industry by debarring them from the enjoyment of its fruits." The depressed condition of Ireland, the bishops claimed, was traceable to these enactments and "not to any innate indolence of the people." Although they had no intention of denying the rights of property, they declared, it was deplorable that "the sacred and indefeasible rights of life are forgotten" because "hallowed as are the rights of property, those of life are still more sacred."¹⁸⁶ The memorial did not literally deny divine visitation, but it was not referred to in any form or context, suggesting that by the time the document was composed, the Church had abandoned providentialist thinking in its English version. Disheartened by the steadily growing misery surrounding them, the scanty means of providing help at their disposal and the gnawing suspicion that the government would never take responsibility, clergymen became increasingly outspoken in their disapproval. In December, the parish priest of

¹⁸⁵ John Hughes, *A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine in 1847* (New York: Edward Dunigan, 1847), pp. 20, 21.

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Gray, *The Irish Famine*, pp. 158-59.

Kenmare wrote to Trevelyan, reminding him that “[w]hatever be the cost or expense ... every Christian must admit, that the people must not be suffered to starve in the midst of plenty, and that the first duty of a Government is to provide for the poor under the circumstances such as they are placed.”¹⁸⁷ In 1848, Fr Nicholas Coughlan of Waterford expressed his opinion that “as to this heavy scourge coming from holy providence, I believe none of it; I rather believe it comes *from beyond the (Irish) channel*” [original emphasis].¹⁸⁸ The clergy thus no longer felt obliged to hold their peace, but neither the bishops’ memorial nor the efforts of individual priests to influence the government achieved anything.

Any attempt to assess the extent to which providentialist interpretations of the Famine prevailed among the victims themselves is hampered by the relative paucity of primary sources. The material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission between 1935 and 1945 suggests that a providentialist reading was quite common both during and after the Famine. The blight itself was often seen as a punishment sent by God, a retribution for the wastefulness of previous years when the potato crop had been abundant. “Old people said it was God’s will to have the Famine come”, an informant said, “for people abused fine food when they had it plenty[.] ... Well, it was God’s will I suppose.”¹⁸⁹ Another informant claimed that “[m]ost people think it was a punishment from God for the careless manner in which they treated the crops the years previous when there was a very plentiful supply of potatoes.”¹⁹⁰ Similar impressions of the cause of the blight can be found in contemporary Gaelic manuscripts. For example, the scribe Peadar Ó Gealacháin, writing in verse, stated his view on the matter thus: “It is my opinion, and I write no lie[.]... that what banished our noble, auspicious crop was Christ’s vengeance on senseless fools.”¹⁹¹ As the Folklore Commission material indicates, this interpretation has largely survived in folk memory. David Thomson makes special mention of its enduring character in his memoirs from the nineteen-thirties. Working as a tutor on a County Roscommon estate, he discussed the Famine with the wife of one of the estate labourers who could still recall her parents talking and telling stories about it. From them she had inherited the conviction that the blight was a supernatural manifestation. “She would hear of no earthly reason for the famine”, Thomson

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Tóibín and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 137.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Kerr, *The Catholic Church and the Famine*, p. 82.

¹⁸⁹ Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁹¹ Neil Buttimer, “A Stone on the Cairn: The Great Famine in Later Gaelic Manuscripts”, in Morash and Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities*, pp. 93-109 [104].

notes, “and when I said that disaster could have been averted she stood still and looked at me. ‘It was the hand of God’, she said.”¹⁹²

Contemporary observers marvelled at the endurance, patience and resignation they witnessed among the sufferers as destitution and illness spread alarmingly in the winter of 1847. Some attributed it to their strong religious faith, while some detected a fatalism sprung from the apparent hopelessness of their situation. Others, again, simply referred to it as striking and extraordinary. In her diary, Elizabeth Smith observed that “the people are very patient ... and are ‘trusting to God’ for the future.”¹⁹³ William Forster of the Society of Friends, describing his encounter with a sick, emaciated man in Cleggan, County Galway, declared that “I shall never forget the resigned uncomplaining tone with which he told me that all the medicine he wanted was food.”¹⁹⁴ Richard Webb, also of the Society, noted that “the people ... folded their hands in apathy, believing themselves doomed (and it was not much to be wondered at that they did so).”¹⁹⁵ Asenath Nicholson, too, commented on this subject, saying that “in patience they *have*, and *do*, exemplify a pattern which amounts almost to superhuman” [original emphasis].¹⁹⁶ Yet she was not certain of what had produced this patience extending to submissiveness in a people she perceived of as “naturally impetuous in their passions.” Thus her questions, “[w]as it their hereditary suffering that had become a second nature, was it the peculiarity belonging to hunger alone or was it their religion?” remain unanswered.¹⁹⁷

In the part of his memoir dealing with the Famine, Hugh Dorian refers to the prevalence of passive obedience, asking how it was that the people could “submit to such slavery” as constituted all the suffering caused by famine. The answer he provides is unequivocal:

[It] can only be accounted for and traced to the teachings of and consolations given them by their clergy; their own submissiveness to the advices given; their expectations in a future world; their thoughts on the shortness of time; and in short their love and fear of the invisible – the Great Supreme Ruler[.] ... [I]t was these and these only thoughts kept them within bounds and enabled them to suffer.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² David Thomson, *Woodbrook* [1974] (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 176.

¹⁹³ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 133.

¹⁹⁴ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 157.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁹⁶ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹⁸ Hugh Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster*, ed. Breandán Mac Suibhne and David Dickson (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), p. 256.

Dorian's reference to the teachings of the clergy indicates that Mitchel and Davitt were at least partially justified in attributing the lack of resistance to the influence of the Church. Suggestions to the same effect can be found in the Folklore Commission material, such as the statement by one informant that "[a] priest told the people that this black pestilence was ruination from the hand of God."¹⁹⁹ The conciliatory efforts of the clergy were also noted by some later commentators. P.S. O'Hegarty, for example, remarked that since priests neither could nor would recommend or tolerate violence, they "preached Christian fortitude and Christian resignation." But unlike Davitt, O'Hegarty recognized the dilemma arising from their position as spokesmen of the Church on the one hand, and as tenders of their parishioners on the other. Thus he saw fit to give due credit to their humanitarian efforts by stating that "they did their best, suffered with their flocks, and in many cases died with them."²⁰⁰ Commentators connected with the Church such as Canon O'Rourke and Fr Joseph Guinan tended not to allude to any specific clerical intervention but rather attributed the patience and resignation of the people directly to their faith. "The calm, uncomplaining resignation with which they met death", said Fr Guinan in a lecture in 1907, "was more than human. It was sublime. Their faith and the consolations of their religion lifted them above the utter misery of their earthly lot."²⁰¹ In a similar vein, Canon O'Rourke wrote of the people that "they cursed not, they reviled not; they only yearned for the consolation of their holy religion, and looked hopefully to him [God] for a better world."²⁰²

1.2.2. 'A listless, improvident people'

The rhetoric employed by providentialists suggests a tendency, conscious or unconscious on their part, to evade responsibility not only by invoking the hand of God but also by designating the Irish as the authors of their own misery. The people's perceived laziness, improvidence and fecklessness were seen as the chief causes of their poverty while also being indications of moral defects inherent in the Irish character. Therefore, it was argued, God's punishment was inflicted on them and from the "transient evil" of the famine would ultimately come "permanent good." It was expected that hardship and suffering would teach peasants as well as landlords the virtues of industry, thrift and self-reli-

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Carmel Quinlan, "A punishment from God': The Famine in the Centenary Folklore Questionnaire", *Irish Review*, no. 19 (1996), pp. 68-86 [72].

²⁰⁰ O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 325.

²⁰¹ Joseph Guinan, *The Famine Years* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, 1908), p. 25.

²⁰² O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*, p. 158.

ance which were commonly found to be wanting in them, and that these virtues would have a civilizing influence, acting as deterrents to moral depravity. “The great evil with which we have to contend”, wrote Trevelyan, “is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.”²⁰³ An editorial in the *Times* expressed the same view, saying that “[i]t is the national character, the national thoughtlessness, the national indolence ... which demand the attention of Governments”, and that “there are ingredients in the Irish character which must be modified and corrected” before any improvement in the condition of Ireland could be expected.²⁰⁴ *The Economist*, in turn, insisted that “Irish misery will never be cured or even materially alleviated until Irishmen have learned to look for its causes in their own character and conduct.”²⁰⁵ Reasoning along similar lines in her diary, Elizabeth Smith complained that “[e]nergy is so wanting among these Celtick [*sic*] races that there is no inspiring them to help themselves.”²⁰⁶ She concluded that “the character of the people is at the bottom of the distress” and that, therefore, “the destruction by poverty and famine is ... a good feature.”²⁰⁷ Smith repeatedly referred to the Irish people as uncivilized and wrote condescendingly of their defective intellects. “We must always remember that these are but an *emerging* people”, she remarked, adding that the Irish must not be expected to be “more on a par with ourselves than it is possible for their intellect to become under many generations” [original emphasis].²⁰⁸ As for their supposed moral defects, she thought that “[a]nother generation at least must pass away before we can hope for much moral improvement.”²⁰⁹ In Chapter 6, we shall see how the landlord in Eugene McCabe’s *Tales from the Poorhouse* blames the famine disaster on the improvident, lazy, ignorant people in the attempt to absolve himself from responsibility.

In the British perception of the Irish people, there was a close connection between their idleness and their total dependence on the potato. The widely held belief was that the cultivation of potatoes in so-called lazy beds bred indolence and ignorance because it was a method which required but little exertion or skill. In *The Irish Crisis*, Trevelyan explained that such a mode of cultiva-

²⁰³ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 156.

²⁰⁴ *Times*, 22 September 1846.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Michael de Nie, “The Famine, Irish Identity and the British Press”, *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1998), pp. 27–34 [32].

²⁰⁶ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 81.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

tion only required “a fortnight for planting, a week or ten days for digging”, after which the peasant was “at leisure to follow his own inclinations” which, he implied, were base and uncivilized.²¹⁰ Other government officials were equally critical of the potato economy. Randolph Routh, the Chairman of the Relief Commission, stated that “[t]he little industry called for to rear the potato, and its prolific growth, leave the people to indolence and all kinds of vice, which habitual labour and a higher order of food would prevent.”²¹¹ British newspapers and journals such as the *Times*, *The Economist* and *Punch* expressed similar views and thus contributed to the shaping of public opinion on the matter. In 1846, a letter to the editor of the *Times* condemned the Irish for “idly and stupidly” persisting in depending on a crop “the precarious nature of which is no more than a fair set off against the small amount of labour required to produce it”, the implication being that the cultivators had only themselves to blame.²¹² That same year, the editors of the paper welcomed the potato blight as a “blessing”, claiming that “[w]hen the Celts once cease to be potatophagi, they must become carnivorous”, and that this in turn would bring “steadiness, regularity and perseverance.”²¹³ In 1847, Trevelyan himself wrote a letter to the paper in which he expressed his hopes that the “idle, barbarous, isolated potato cultivation” in Ireland would eventually become a thing of the past.²¹⁴ His choice of the word “barbarous” suggests a bias: the potato was an inferior form of nourishment, unacceptable as a staple food in a civilized society.

Several contemporary commentators who based their conclusions on observations made while travelling, living or working among the Irish peasants contested the accusations of inveterate indolence as a character trait. They tended instead to see the alleged laziness of the peasant as a consequence of the conditions under which he lived. As the rural population grew rapidly in the pre-Famine decades, the prevailing system of landholding, by which land was let to a tenant farmer who in turn sub-let part of his holding to cottiers, resulted in extensive sub-division of tillable land. By 1845, there were over half a million cottiers and smallholders in Ireland who occupied plots of land ranging from less than one acre to ten acres in size.²¹⁵ On these small plots, only subsistence farming based on potato cultivation was possible if a family were to earn a rent and support itself. The fact that these smallholders had

²¹⁰ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 4.

²¹¹ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 52.

²¹² *Times*, 1 September 1846.

²¹³ *Times*, 22 September 1846.

²¹⁴ *Times*, 9 October 1847.

²¹⁵ John Keating, *Irish Famine Facts* (Dublin: Teagasc, 1996), pp. 16-17.

no security of tenure meant that the incentive for improvement was all but non-existent, and any improvement undertaken by the tenants was likely to result in increased rents. In his *Letters from Ireland*, Alexander Somerville commented extensively on what he saw as the disadvantages of this system from the peasant's point of view. Having acquainted himself with its operation and its effects, particularly on the landless labourers endeavouring to subsist on the yield of their rented plots and on their small earnings from seasonal work, if and when there was any to be had, he concluded that he cannot "pass without denial the assertion that the Irish peasant is from choice the enemy of industry."²¹⁶ Somerville also objected to the racial connotations which to some extent informed the Victorian perception of the Irish. Thus he deplored the fact that "there are sensible people who gravely moralize on the indolence of the Irish peasant and discover that he does not work well because he is a Celt."²¹⁷

Somerville's conception of why the peasants were idle was shared by the Manchester writer and printer Spencer T. Hall. On his return from a visit to Limerick in 1849, he wrote: "I have often in England heard the Irish charged with idleness. I do not however believe them more idle than many of those who so call them would be had they no better motives for toiling."²¹⁸ Asenath Nicholson was indignant about the tendency to castigate the peasants. She held that the rich were justly criticized for idleness, but that the poor could and should not be censured on the same grounds. "That idleness and improvidence ... are two great evils of Ireland, must be acknowledged", she wrote. "The rich are idle from a silly pride and long habits of indulgence; and the poor, because no man hires them."²¹⁹ The word "lazy" as applied to the peasantry is used ironically by Nicholson, and it appears consistently within quotation marks in her text. Hugh Dorian, writing about his fellow countrymen, admitted and deplored the fact that they were "just living from hand to mouth, with no thought of a provision made for the future."²²⁰ Yet at the same time, he maintained that "the poor were treated and despised as if they were beings of quite a different creation"²²¹ and that those who were inclined to "malign" them did not "understand the

²¹⁶ Alexander Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847*, ed. K.M.D. Snell (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), p. 64.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²¹⁸ Spencer T. Hall, *Life and Death in Ireland as Witnessed in 1849* (Manchester: J.T. Parkes, 1850), p. 23.

²¹⁹ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 33.

²²⁰ Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster*, p. 214.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

real character of the people.” One way of reaching that understanding, Dorian suggested, would be to have such maligners exchange their position in life for that of the poor peasant.²²²

Anti-Irish sentiment was not a new phenomenon at the time of the Famine. Ned Lebow has shown that, in British history-writing, it can be traced from Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century through the Elizabethans up to Hume and finally to Macaulay in the nineteenth century. Ireland was invariably described as uncivilized, her people as ignorant and barbaric, prone to treachery and rebellion, and their religion as suspect and even un-Christian. Although nineteenth-century historians began to revise this portrayal of the Irish and to replace it with more favourable appraisals, public opinion formed by earlier histories was slow to change, and popular historians still tended to rely on the interpretations of their predecessors. As Lebow argues, even though Macaulay criticized English prejudices, he maintained that the Irish were so inferior in terms of civilization that they were bound to be met with contempt by more advanced societies. Macaulay deplored the fact that they had resisted the civilizing efforts of the English and “resorted to a ... racial characterization of them” when analysing the reasons for that resistance. Thus Irish barbarism as a manifestation of national character was, in Lebow’s opinion, a long-established feature, developed over the centuries of British domination in Ireland, of the stereotype commonly accepted in England by the eighteen-forties.²²³ This stereotypical image of the Irish was to have a significant impact on famine relief efforts, official as well as private.

During the winter of 1847, with the Irish protesting the threatened closure of the public works and openly criticizing government relief efforts as inadequate, British public opinion began to veer away from the earlier manifestations of broad sympathy with the plight of Ireland. This gradual change of heart was largely due to the influence of newspapers and periodicals which were considered arbiters of middle-class values and opinions. The *Times*, in particular, sharpened its tone at this time, and its defamation of the Irish character became much more pronounced. Ireland was “a nation of beggars”, of “bogtrotters” and of “barbarians”, and the people were “born and bred, from time immemorial, in inveterate indolence, improvidence, disorder and consequent destitution.”²²⁴ The paper declared that “by the inscrutable but invariable laws of nature, the Celt is less energetic, less independent, less industrious than the Saxon. This is

²²² Ibid., p. 257.

²²³ Ned Lebow, “British historians and Irish History”, *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1973), pp. 3-38.

²²⁴ *Times*, 23 March 1847.

the archaic condition of his race.”²²⁵ The satirical journal *Punch*, another representative of middle-class views, initially sympathized with the distressed Irish, but during 1847, there was a reversal of attitude as *Punch*, taking its cue from the *Times*, came to regard conditions in Ireland as the result of inherent deficiencies in the character of the people. Blatantly racist cartoons depicting the Irishman with simian features suggested an “otherness” which placed him in an inferior position biologically and therefore also morally, intellectually and socially. As a stereotypical image, this picture pandered to the notion that the Celt was incapable of elevating and improving himself and that, unless he adopted the English model of industry, orderliness and moral uprightness, his situation would not be ameliorated. That the Irish apparently refused to avail themselves of the enlightening influence of England and instead kept insisting on continued material assistance which, in public opinion, had been given in abundance already by the end of 1846, was perceived as a most impertinent example of ingratitude. This incensed the public as well as the press. The *Times* held that England was being “denounced and reviled” and subjected to “the grossest and foulest abuse” in spite of its proffered charity and goodwill.²²⁶ So the paper considered any further generosity to be wasted on a people who persisted in “a crafty, a calculating, a covetous idleness.” Continuing to pour English money into Ireland would be useless, the paper argued, because

what art, what policy, what wealth is cunning enough, wise enough, rich enough to assuage the moral evils and stay the moral disease of a vast population steeped in the congenial mire of voluntary indigence and speculating on the gains of a perpetual famine.²²⁷

By the spring of 1847, this increasing censoriousness in British attitudes had brought about considerable donor fatigue. Public opinion anticipated the main premise of the impending Poor Law Amendment: Irish property, not the British government or British charity, was to pay for Irish destitution. Early sympathy with the famine victims was replaced by indifference mingled with irritation and alarm as British seaports were being overrun by Irish paupers fleeing from starvation and disease. Liverpool bore the brunt of the invasion. Already at the beginning of the year, the *Times* had warned that this would occur, reporting that “the anticipated invasion of Irish pauperism has commenced, 15,000 have already ... landed in Liverpool and block up her thoroughfares with masses

²²⁵ *Times*, 31 March 1847.

²²⁶ Quoted in Michael de Nie, “Curing the Irish Moral Plague”, *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1997), pp. 63-85 [67].

²²⁷ *Times*, 26 March 1847.

of misery”²²⁸ Since Liverpool was also a port of embarkation for transatlantic passengers, some of the Irish emigrants eventually moved on. But most of those who remained were inevitably thrown upon English poor relief, thus becoming an additional burden on the tax payers. An estimated 11,000 Irish paupers were receiving relief from the parish of Liverpool by April,²²⁹ and the numbers in need of assistance were steadily increasing. This situation was aggravated by the fact that these people brought typhus and dysentery in their wake, causing serious epidemics to break out during the late spring and summer. Dread of fever contagion further weakened the impulse to sympathize with or attempt to help the immigrants, and Irish landlords were blamed for causing this affliction to fall upon England by evicting their tenants and refusing to support them on poor relief at home. The commonly expressed opinion of the press was that if this state of affairs were allowed to continue, the consequences would be dire. To illustrate the point, the *Times* conjured up “the spectacle of England positively invaded, overrun, devoured, infested, poisoned, and desolated by Irish pauperism.”²³⁰ As economic depression struck Britain in the autumn of 1847, the destitute Irish were considered a superfluous drain on British resources, exacerbating the situation of the poor at home. Hardened public attitudes were evidenced by the response to a Queen’s Letter in October calling for donations to relieve suffering in Ireland. The *Times* received over sixty letters from clergymen objecting to, and even refusing to participate in the collection, while the paper itself declared that it was against “begging for Ireland.”²³¹ The previous January, the first Queen’s Letter had raised nearly £172,000, but the renewed appeal generated only £30,000.²³²

By 1848, British compassion and charity had all but dried up and the abortive Young Ireland rebellion in July spelled a definitive end to whatever may have been left. The *Times* seemed to be justified in claiming that “the peasantry have turned famine into gain, and from its proceeds purchased firearms”, and that “we send money to Ireland and it is used as the price of sedition.”²³³ Public opinion was outraged by what was perceived as scandalous ingratitude in return for unparalleled British efforts to relieve Irish distress. This sentiment was confirmed as well as shared by the government in a communication from Prime Minister Russell to Lord Lieutenant Clarendon in February 1849:

²²⁸ *Times*, 5 January 1847.

²²⁹ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 334.

²³⁰ *Times*, 16 April 1847.

²³¹ Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 165.

²³² Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 112.

²³³ *Times*, 10 December 1846, 19 March 1847.

The great difficulty this year respecting Ireland is one which ... lies deep in the breasts of the British people. It is this – we have granted, lent, subscribed, worked, visited, clothed the Irish; millions of pounds worth of money, years of debates etc. etc. – the only return is calumny and rebellion – let us not grant, clothe etc. etc. any more and see what they will do[.] ... Now, without borrowing and lending we could have no great plan for Ireland – and much as I wish it, I have got to see that it is impracticable.²³⁴

Russell's verdict may seem callous, but the last line suggests that he was loath to leave Ireland entirely to her own devices. Yet since public opinion as well as that of the majority of Parliament were against him, any proposal for further substantial aid was bound to be rejected. Two years of famine had consolidated and confirmed the Irish stereotype in the collective British consciousness, and it was to endure through the rest of the nineteenth century. Whether or not it can or should be labelled "racist" is perhaps inconsequential within the Famine context. The crucial point is that it affected the scope of British relief efforts at all levels.

1.2.3. A 'myth' perpetuated

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, most Irish histories and other writings on the Famine disclose the considerable influence of John Mitchel's interpretation of the event. While reflecting the central concerns of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, they also tend to endorse the views expressed by its author. Although its polemical premises are seriously questioned and often refuted by later historians, the ghost of Mitchel is still present in the writing of the Famine today. Commenting on the influence of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, Patrick O'Farrell has observed that "[n]othing written since – history, or novel, or play – has been able to escape, usually by acceptance, but sometimes by qualification or reaction, from the central thesis of that book."²³⁵ That thesis, developed in the pages of the *Nation* and the *United Irishman* and emerging in the forceful rhetoric of Mitchel's book itself, eventually became not only the blueprint for the nationalist reading of the Famine but also the interpretation that most powerfully shaped perceptions of the catastrophe in Ireland and the Irish diaspora. By late 1847, the *Times* recognized the possibility that the genocide theory would be generally embraced in Ireland. The result, warned the paper, would be a myth, "an historical lie", which would assign the role of the culprit to England:

"In the dreadful winter of 1846", it will be written and taught, "when the only food of the Irish Roman Catholics had perished, the Protestant Government

²³⁴ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 244.

²³⁵ Patrick O'Farrell, "Whose Reality? The Irish Famine in History and Literature", p. 1.

of England refused to take any measures to convey food to that miserable population, and sat with folded arms while two millions died.”²³⁶

By virtue of its strong appeal to a people having endured years of hunger, death and dispossession, the nationalist story of the Famine did indeed become a myth in the sense of a traditional narrative embodying popular ideas. Whether or not that myth constitutes “an historical lie” is still a matter of dispute. Mitchell’s allegation of genocidal intent effected by food exports and the “murderous collusion” between Irish landlords and the British government to get rid of “surplus population” by means of evictions and forced emigration has been revised and qualified, but the myth has proved enduring, not to say ineradicable.

In 1847, the conservative politician and political economist Isaac Butt lashed out at British government policy, criticizing in particular its commitment to free trade. “Can we wonder”, he asked,

if the Irish people believe – *and believe it they do* – that the lives of those who have perished, and who will perish, have been sacrificed by a deliberate compact to the gains of English merchants, and if this belief has created among all classes a feeling of deep dissatisfaction, not only with the ministry but with English rule. [original emphasis]²³⁷

A letter published in the *Galway Mercury* deplored the terrible distress witnessed by the writer who was convinced that “any alleviation ... need not be expected, at least from the Whig Government.” Such was the opinion of “almost the entire rural population”, he claimed: “They believe that the Government are determined to put to death one half of the people.”²³⁸ Similarly, the *Ballyshannon Herald* asserted that “[d]readful hatred of England, of her institutions – is widely diffused among the humbler orders in Ireland.”²³⁹ In his biography of John Russell, published in 1889, Spencer Walpole noted that “well-informed Irishmen even now assert that their fellow-countrymen have neither forgotten nor forgiven the manner in which Lord John Russell met the famine.”²⁴⁰ Comments such as these suggest that the nationalists’ interpretation of the event had gained credibility already during the Famine and that their notion of government culpability rang true also to the lower classes. The *Nation* was particularly anxious to promote the notion of British culpability since this was the

²³⁶ *Times*, 11 October 1847.

²³⁷ Isaac Butt, “The Famine in the Land”, in Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2, p. 162.

²³⁸ Quoted in the *Times*, 8 March 1847.

²³⁹ *Ballyshannon Herald*, 17 September 1847.

²⁴⁰ Quoted in O’Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 321.

main premise of the nationalist agenda. Already in 1846, the paper claimed that “[t]he Irish people ... are expecting absolute famine day by day ... and they ascribe it, unanimously ... to the greedy and cruel policy of England.”²⁴¹ Yet somewhat contrary opinions were also voiced. Although Fr Joseph Guinan conceded that the government must be held largely responsible for “the famine slaughter”, he was averse to the perpetuation of bitter recollections. “There is no use now in indulging in bitter reflections or recriminations”, he wrote in 1908, because “the famine is past and gone like a frightful dream, and the bitter memories it has left are now well nigh forgotten.”²⁴² For another man of the Church, Canon Peter O’Leary, those memories were still very much alive in the twentieth century. His story “The Hunger” vividly recalls the trauma of the Famine years and it leaves the reader in no doubt as to who, in the author’s opinion, was responsible for the misery endured by the starving people:

That was the way things were then, ugly and hateful and loathsome[.] ... And, to make matters altogether worse, it was not really by the will of God that things were so. It was that way because of the will of the people[.] ... There was sent out food from Ireland that year as much – no! twice as much – corn as would have nourished every person living in the country[.] ... [I]f you had spoken to the gentlemen of England at that time of a law to protect the people, they would have said you were mad[.] ... To crush the people down and to plunder them, to put them to death by famine and by every other kind of injustice – that’s why the English made laws in those days. ²⁴³

Contradictory perceptions and interpretations are evident also in the Irish Folklore Commission material. As noted earlier, informants generally explained the famine in providential terms as a punishment from God. This would suggest that the survivors and their immediate descendants did not credit the notion of genocidal intent on the part of the British government. There is no general condemnation of British rule, and public figures such as Trevelyan and Russell, who were frequently under attack in the Irish press, are not even mentioned in the accounts. Cormac Ó Gráda has observed that the reason for this was possibly that such figures “were remote and unfamiliar to the underclasses most at risk”,²⁴⁴ while Carmel Quinlan has noted that “the folklore of the famine is concerned with local events”, and that “[i]t is likely that people saw no further than their local calamity.”²⁴⁵ Thus it would seem that Mitchel’s central thesis had in

²⁴¹ *Nation*, 14 March 1846.

²⁴² Guinan, *The Famine Years*, pp. 4, 32.

²⁴³ Peter O’Leary, *Mo Sgéal Fèin/My Story* [1915] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 52.

²⁴⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and Beyond* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 197.

²⁴⁵ Quinlan, “A punishment from God”, p. 73.

fact not been rooted in public consciousness; the rage and accusatory language of his diatribe are conspicuously absent from the folklore accounts, and when any resentment is expressed, it is mostly directed at landlords, agents, shopkeepers and landgrabbers. Although the issues of responsibility and blame were not specifically addressed in the questionnaire, there were some unsolicited answers suggesting that there was at least some knowledge of and dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the crisis. "The English did not want to stop the famine", claimed one informant, and went on to "prove" his charge by saying that "[t]hey kept one cargo of yellow meal until it went bad after it had arrived from America and they threw it into the Liffey."²⁴⁶ In a statement that lays blame on landlords as well as England, William Powell of Cork asserted that

the Famine was man-made. It was our rulers that saw to it that our food was shipped away to England from us, and left the people here starving[.] ... The men in power were all Protestants[.] ... They were in league with England and it was their delight to see the population decreasing by the thousands dying with hunger and what followed.²⁴⁷

There are intimations of Mitchel's ideas also in accounts referring specifically to food exports. An informant from Westport, County Mayo, stated that

[i]n the year 1847 fourteen schooners of about 200 tons each left Westport Quay laden with wheat and oats to feed the English people while the Irish were starving. This happened one morning on one tide and was repeated several times during the famine.

A farmer from County Clare lamented that "a shipload of American corn coming would pass a shipload of Irish corn going out of Ireland to England", and Richard Delaney of Wexford tersely claimed that "[a]lthough people died, there was plenty of food in the country."²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, statements like these are relatively few. On the whole, the folklore accounts disclose a sense of rudimentary, unfocused resentments, as if people really did not know who to blame.

Discussing the reasons why the nationalist reading of the Famine eventually became so prominent, Kerby Miller suggests that "it may be significant that public criticisms of government policy and emigration became ubiquitous only in the Famine's latter years - *after* decimation of the lower classes" when relatively well-to-do tenants began to flee the country, thereby threatening "strong farmers, shopkeepers, and clergymen with a loss of cheap labor, valuable cus-

²⁴⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁴⁷ Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, p. 211.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

tomers and devout parishioners” [original emphasis].²⁴⁹ The fact that, by this time, the Catholic Church, constitutional nationalists and even conservatives were all critical of the government and of what was perceived as forced emigration triggered by British policy would support Miller’s inference. The American traveller William Balch, who toured Ireland in 1847-48, claimed that “a class of the people” set “all their misfortunes and misery ... to the account of English interference – high rents, heavy taxes, potato rot and all.”²⁵⁰ So as the famine wore on, an increasing number of Irishmen from different walks of life tended to blame the British government for the disaster. Yet it was the Irish emigrants in America, especially those who felt that they had been forced into exile, who most readily concurred with the nationalist view of government culpability. Statements such as “I’ll never forgive that government [the British] the longest day I live”, and “I’ll never forgive the bloody English government that allowed a man to be treated worse than I’d treat a dog [,] ... and what’s more, I teach my children to hate them too”²⁵¹ reflect the abiding bitterness of many emigrants who were evicted in Ireland. Thus the fears expressed by some sections of the British press such as the *Illustrated London News* and the *Times* that emigrants would carry “bitter hatred” with them into “regions that owe no fealty to the Crown of England” and there “keep up the ancient feud at an unforeseen advantage” proved well-founded.²⁵² That hatred, fuelled by bitter memories of the Famine, was a fundamental push factor leading to the emergence of the Fenian movement in the late eighteen-fifties. Given the hardships endured by the Irish poor during the Famine, it is hardly surprising that nationalist allegations of British misrule, dispossession and forced exile appealed to survivors on both sides of the ocean. According to Patrick O’Farrell, it was “[w]ell-fed nationalists” and “those who fled Ireland and their descendants” who “echoed Mitchel back into the process of comprehending Irish history itself; this was the version of the Famine which took on a continuing dynamic form.”²⁵³ In the next chapter, I consider to what extent this version informs Liam O’Flaherty’s fictional account of the Famine.

²⁴⁹ Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 308.

²⁵⁰ Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It*, p. 214.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 228.

²⁵² *Illustrated London News*, 3 April 1852; *Times*, quoted in the *Nation*, 5 May 1860.

²⁵³ O’Farrell, “Whose Reality? The Irish Famine in History and Literature”, p. 5.

2. “A TERRIBLE AND MOVING VISION”: Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine*.

Liam O’Flaherty (1896-1984) started to write his novel *Famine* in March 1933, apparently with the expectation that it would be finished by September. But in July, he wrote to his publisher, Victor Gollancz, complaining that he was bordering on a state of insanity because “after writing fifty thousand words of *Famine* I had to scrap the whole and reconstruct, and now I’m in a devil of a way.” He estimated that it would take “at least another three months to finish it”, apologized for being behind time, but promised that Gollancz would “have a good thing by December.”¹ That promise turned out to be premature as the work was to occupy him, off and on, for another three years. During that period, O’Flaherty led a wandering life which took him to a number of European countries as well as to the United States, and he was intermittently beset by personal and financial difficulties.² Undoubtedly, such distractions would have impeded O’Flaherty’s ability to concentrate on his writing. But the long gestation of the novel also suggests that he encountered considerable problems with composition, in spite of the confidence exuded by his letters to friends and associates. “I think *Famine* is going to be great”, he confided to John Ford in June, adding that “I’m going to hammer out every word from the depths of my soul.” In December that same year, he told his agent that he was expecting “big things” from the novel and that he felt “confident” of its success.³ That the writing of this novel had indeed involved a great artistic and emotional struggle for O’Flaherty can be gleaned from a letter he sent to Gollancz shortly before the completion of the manuscript. “I shall be glad to have done with it”, he wrote, “as it has nearly broken my heart. I hope it’s worth something after all this trouble.”⁴

The novel was finally published on 11 January 1937, and the reviews indicated that *Famine* definitely was “worth something.” *The Irish Book Lover* called it “a superb achievement” in which O’Flaherty had “shown a terrible and moving vision of the Famine”, bringing to readers “the dreadful reality of famine.” The reviewer declared that it seemed “as though the memory of this tragedy had seized upon the writer rather than that he had merely chosen it as a subject.” O’Flaherty was

¹ A.A. Kelly (ed.), *The Letters of Liam O’Flaherty* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996), p. 269.

² George Jefferson, *Liam O’Flaherty: A Descriptive Bibliography of his Works* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1993), p. 49.

³ Kelly, *The Letters of Liam O’Flaherty*, pp. 274, 278.

⁴ Jefferson, *Liam O’Flaherty*, p. 50.

to be commended for having written “not only a story but a history told in terms of men and women ... truly real and alive, in their strengths and weaknesses, their vitality of spirit.”⁵ Sean O’Faolain, too, wrote an essentially positive review, saying that *Famine* was “O’Flaherty’s best novel.” He saw it as “tremendous” and “biblical” and declared it “the best Irish historical novel to date.” Still, he did have some reservations, the main one being that “the historical comment ... breaks the mood” by bringing in “the ‘as we have seen’ style of the historian.”⁶

Some more recent critics, too, have maintained that O’Flaherty’s strategies of incorporating historical facts and historical explanation into his narrative of the Famine are problematic. James Cahalan finds it unfortunate that O’Flaherty “cannot resist adding textbook-styled explanations of the dramatic events he describes”, while Margaret Kelleher points to the “awkward ... clumsy generalizations” that characterize O’Flaherty’s framing passages which, as a result, “remain at a remove from the rest of the story.” She also observes that he is not unique in this respect; the problem of integrating historical explanation within the famine story is one that besets most novelists who take on the subject.⁷ Why is it, then, that this problem should be so acute precisely in famine literature? Patrick O’Farrell has suggested that, especially in representations “from below”, the problem arises because “mass peasant history on the dimensions of the Irish Famine is beyond — too big for — the conventional dimensions of the novel and for the particular imperatives that govern it.” In the case of O’Flaherty’s novel, he argues, it is the focus on the victims’ experiences that makes it difficult for the writer to communicate the essential meaning of the event, to make the story comprehensible. Because it is “beyond the natural capacities or range of his choice of characters to make sense to the reader of what is happening”, O’Flaherty is forced to “insert unattributed lumps of school-text history” into his narrative.⁸ What these critics imply, then, is that his novel lacks artistic unity.

In order to illustrate O’Flaherty’s problems of unity and meaning, O’Farrell juxtaposes them to what he considers the success of Mitchel’s Famine story in the same area. Mitchel, he writes,

solved the artistic problem of the Famine and made it both accessible and comprehensible in an essentially *historical way*: he had, using historical methods, blamed it on the English. What more was there a novelist could do to make it readily intelligible?... Mitchel had discovered — or contrived —

⁵ M.L., Review of *Famine*, in *The Irish Book Lover*, xxv (1937), pp. 22-23 [22, 23].

⁶ Sean O’Faolain, Review of *Famine*, in *Ireland Today*, II:2 (1937), pp. 81-82 [81, 82].

⁷ James Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), p. 143; Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 137.

⁸ Patrick O’Farrell, “Whose reality? The Irish Famine in history and literature”, pp. 6, 7-8.

the principle of artistic unity which could convey the essence of the Famine with a simplicity which blended reality with rage, and which mixed nationalist propaganda with the elements of high drama into a plotted tragedy of the blackest hue [original emphasis].⁹

As I suggested earlier, it is hard to deny the effectiveness of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*. Mitchel's forceful rhetoric and the assertiveness of his arguments defy even modern readers who have the benefit of hindsight and accumulated historical facts to challenge his conclusions. But quite apart from whether or not Mitchel's historical explanation is acceptable as the truth, one might also consider how and to what extent his account as a whole conveys meaning and "essence." *The Last Conquest of Ireland* foregrounds the political aspects which Mitchel saw as crucial in turning the failure of the potato crop into a major disaster. The meaning of the Famine is to be found in Ireland's long history of oppression, in the political and economic imperatives which led to "starvation amidst plenty" and made a mockery of famine relief and, above all, in the diabolical scheme of extermination through which England sought to perpetuate her subjugation of the country. This interpretation certainly makes the Famine "readily intelligible", but it also inscribes the event as primarily another part of a larger history: that of Ireland in her colonial "slavery." This in turn means that the nationalist struggle against imperialism takes centre stage, and it is here that Mitchel risks losing sight of a very important constituent of the "essence" of the Famine, namely the suffering peasantry. They are present in his text, dying of starvation and disease, but their suffering is overshadowed by what, for Mitchel, is even more terrible: the deadly policies of the imperial government. As Christopher Morash has noted, "[i]n Mitchel's writing of the Famine, true horror lies not in cholera, typhus, or starvation, but in the increased amount of government control they occasioned."¹⁰

When Mitchel refers to the victims of famine in *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, he does so mostly with an air of detachment. In his text, the starving, sick and dying tend to remain an anonymous, grey mass. In 1845, he tells us, "many hundreds of people had lain down and died on the roadsides, for want of food", and the following year, "not less than 300,000 perished, either of mere hunger, or typhus fever caused by hunger." We are also told that, between 1848 and 1849, "the Government Census Commissioners admit 9,395 deaths by famine alone; a number which would be about true if multiplied by twenty-five."¹¹ The

⁹ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 65.

¹¹ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 97, 117, 215.

language of statistics conveys a sense of the enormous loss of life, but it does not engage with the suffering behind those losses: death becomes an abstraction. Moreover, the last example gives the impression that it is not the frightful death toll in itself that is at issue, but the fact that the government has chosen to hide the real extent of mortality by publishing “false” statistics. In his own history of the Famine, Canon O’Rourke observes that

the starving poor suffered so intensely, and in such a variety of ways, that it becomes a hard task either to narrate or listen to the piteous story; it sickens and wrings the heart[.] ...To say the people were dying by the thousand of sheer starvation conveys no idea of their sufferings; the expression is too general to move our feelings.¹²

In spite of admitting to the “hard task”, O’Rourke tried to face up to it, chiefly through the inclusion in his history of numerous eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports, coroner’s inquests and anecdotes related to him personally by people with first-hand experiences of the Famine years.

Mitchel’s text makes but sparing use of such material. In the final eight chapters of the book, he focuses almost exclusively on Young Ireland and the Irish Confederation, their efforts to expose and counteract destructive relief policies, their continued demand for the repeal of the Union, their quarrels about whether or not armed resistance was an option, and the largely successful attempts of the government to silence these “subversives.” Mitchel himself occupies a prominent position in all this, as his seditious articles in the *United Irishman*, calling for a fight to establish an Irish republic and outlining military tactics for an uprising, eventually led to his arrest and deportation in 1848. He indulges in elaborations on the brutality and injustice of the coercive measures imposed by the government, on the particulars of his own arrest and trial, and on how a packed jury ensured his sentence of deportation. In this context, the victims as well as the famine itself threaten to disappear altogether. There are only sporadic reminders that famine is still raging and that people are still dying. Having given a lengthy account of his arrest and trial, he notes that “[i]n the meantime, every day was bringing in more terrible news of the devastation of the famine, and evictions of the tenantry.” Disgusted by the failure of the majority of the Confederation leaders to make his sentence a motive for armed rebellion, he quotes at length from an article written by his friend John Martin, reproaching the same leaders for missing the opportunity and for literally turning Mitchel over to the enemy. Then he hastens to add: “Throughout all these

¹² O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, p. 143.

scenes, the horrible famine was raging as it had never raged before.”¹³ While positioning himself as a victim, it seems as if Mitchel was aware of his own egocentricity and the possibility that it might put some readers off. Therefore, his own implied victimhood had to be counterbalanced by strategically placed references, however impassive, to the plight of the chief victims.

In the few longer passages describing famine victims, Mitchel employs either the literary mode of the Gothic or the rather dispassionate style of the historian. As I noted earlier, the description of the cowering wretches in the turnip-fields and the fleshless limbs and bloated, greenish faces of the children he saw in Galway does have affective power. But for two reasons, Mitchel’s use of this type of imagery in the representation of the impact of a traumatic event is problematic. Firstly, there is a strain of emotional voyeurism in it which tends to foreclose the possibility of empathy. The victims appear as the otherworldly creatures of a Gothic horror story rather than as the real, suffering human beings that they are. This dehumanization risks alienating readers from the reality of the victims rather than bringing them closer to it. Secondly, and more importantly, Mitchel’s chief reason for conjuring up these images is not necessarily to convey the horrors of starvation *per se* as much as to firmly establish their immediate *source*, namely the British government, represented by the image of Trevelyan’s claw in the vitals of the children. For me at any rate, this leaves the impression that Mitchel exploits victimhood in order to reinforce his thesis of genocide: what he has seen of the suffering ostensibly validates his accusations as well as his hatred of British rule in Ireland. To his intended audience, Irish nationalists at home and in the American diaspora and the famine refugees and their descendants, this description may have seemed accurate as well as just, but to me, it appears unsatisfactory. Dominick La Capra has noted that

the response to extreme, traumatizing events ... tends to be ambivalent and often combines attraction and repulsion. One crucial role of certain moral norms is to help resolve this ambivalence in the direction of empathy with the victim and repulsion toward the perpetrator.¹⁴

Mitchel’s moral outrage finds expression in the vampiric figure of Trevelyan, symbolizing the destructive power of British rule. This figure is evoked to provoke repulsion in his target audience toward the alleged perpetrators, while the image of the children as the living dead is intended to arouse sym-

¹³ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 190, 194-95.

¹⁴ La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 133

pathy. As I see it, Mitchel achieves this, but he does not manage to convey a real sense of empathy, that is, “an affective relation, rapport or bond” with these victims.¹⁵

If Mitchel is less than convincing in representing the effects of starvation, he fares no better with respect to the numerous other consequences of famine with which the victims were afflicted. Discussing the events of 1847, he dwells on the Amended Poor Law, the Gregory clause and the Vagrancy Act, and, in a short paragraph, comments on how these measures served to diminish the chances of survival for the destitute peasants:

They had no money to emigrate; no food, no land, no roof over them; no hope before them. They began to envy the lot of those who had died in the first year's famine. The poor-houses were all full, and much more than full. Each of them was an hospital for typhus fever; and it was very common for three fever patients to be in one bed, some dead, and others not yet dead.

He also notes that the impact of the Amended Poor Law extended to include even the deceased:

Parishes all over the country being exhausted by rates, refused to provide coffins for the dead paupers, and they were thrown coffinless into holes; but in some parishes (in order to have at least the look of a decent interment) a coffin was made, with its bottom hinged at one side, and closed at the other by a latch — the uses of which are obvious.

Yet he declines to elaborate on what all of this *meant* in terms of humanity and human dignity. Instead, readers are left with mere implications and invited to use their imagination to “fill up the appalling picture” with details of the misery.¹⁶ In this case, too, Mitchel's intended readership determined his mode of representation. To part of them, at least, his implications would have been quite clear. For example, they would have recognized the degradation of being landless in a peasant society where land, apart from being the means of survival, was an indication of social status. They would also have understood the humiliation involved in being forced to enter the poorhouse, and the indignity of burials in sliding coffins and famine pits in a culture where the rites associated with death and interment were of utmost importance. To readers unfamiliar with such cultural particulars, on the other hand, these aspects would remain hidden beneath what is presented as the more immediately compelling attribute of famine, that is, physical and psychological suffering. But although Mitchel

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁶ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 128.

here focuses on the plight of the victims, his matter-of-fact style suggests that he is not whole-heartedly engaged in the effort to represent it. His main commitment is still to the exposure of the “diabolical scheme” masterminded by the British government, and his most passionate and eloquent rage is expended in the tirades condemning that scheme and those responsible for putting it into effect. Consequently, the victims are deprived of a voice, and they remain anonymous, without real representation.

In the introduction to his play *Famine* (1968), Tom Murphy writes:

[T]he absence of food, the cause of famine, is only one aspect of famine. What about the other ‘poverties’ that attend famine? A hungry and demoralised people become silent. People emigrate in great numbers and leave spaces that cannot be filled. Intelligence becomes cunning. There is a poverty of thought and expression. Womanhood becomes harsh. Love, tenderness, loyalty, generosity go out the door in the struggle for survival. Men fester in vicarious dreams of destruction. The natural exuberance and extravagance of youth is repressed[.] ...The dream of food can become a reality ... and people’s bodies are nourished back to health. What can similarly restore mentalities that have become distorted, spirits that have become mean and broken? Or, what price survival? ¹⁷

Murphy explores these aspects in his play, as does O’Flaherty in his novel. But judging from Mitchel’s text, such considerations of the effects of famine do not command a prominent position in a discourse which is “essentially historical.” This may simply be due to the fact that, prior to the twentieth century, history-writing generally paid little attention to the lives of ordinary people. Thomas Carlyle, whom Mitchel admired for his style of writing, but whose “vilification of the Celt” infuriated him, was one historian who saw this as a shortcoming which needed to be remedied. In his essays on the writing of history, Carlyle reproaches political historians (among whom Mitchel could be counted) for being too concerned with governments, kings, battles and the big names of history to pay any attention to “the whole world of Existence” outside of that sphere. “Which was the more important personage in man’s history”, he asks, “he who first led armies over the Alps ... or the nameless boor who first hammered out for himself an iron spade?”¹⁸ But as Ann Rigney has noted, while Carlyle made a case for including the nameless in the writing of history, he was also troubled by the difficulty such a project entailed. As he saw it, the knowability of everyday life in the past was severely limited by the paucity of

¹⁷ Tom Murphy, *Plays:1* (London: Methuen, 1992) , p. xi.

¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, volume 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, n.d.), pp. 174, 170.

information in the historical records. In other words, the quotidian tended to be inaccessible and, therefore, incomprehensible.¹⁹

For Mitchel, who lived and wrote at the very time of the Famine, such problems would not have complicated the representation of the struggle with calamity that the affected peasants had to face. And yet these people do not figure very prominently in *The Last Conquest of Ireland*. If part of the reason for this was Mitchel's almost exclusive focus on the politics of the Famine years, another part of it was that the hunger, disease and deprivation which constituted the peasants' reality lay beyond the limits of his experience. So although he did not acknowledge it, he probably had to contend with the same problems of representation which so many of his contemporaries kept referring to in their accounts of famine victims. The notion that the realities of famine were too horrible to be contained within ordinary language was widespread, and eye-witnesses often declared themselves defeated in their efforts to find metaphors to describe what they had seen. But because Mitchel had an ideological axe to grind, the problem was perhaps not as acute for him as it seems to have been for philanthropists like William Bennett or Asenath Nicholson, for the newspaper reporter, or for the parish priest who witnessed the suffering on a daily basis. The Gothic was especially suitable for Mitchel's purposes since it could serve to emphasize the cruelty of the "perpetrators" as well as the suffering of the victims. While the main function of the Gothic in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* is to reinforce the nationalist interpretation of the Famine, it does so not only by demonizing the English, but also by invoking the sublime in the depiction of the victims. Although Mitchel does not use words like "indescribable" or "unspeakable", the Gothic imagery suggests that the bloodsucking English have reduced the Irish people to such a state of otherness that they inspire fear more than any other feeling in the witnesses.

The tendency to sublimate suffering is even more apparent in another, earlier account of the victims in Galway which was published in the *Nation*. In this article, Mitchel evokes a sense of the sublime through the use of biblical as well as fear-inspiring imagery:

But what (may Heaven be about us this night!) — what reeking breath of hell is this oppressing the air, heavier and more loathsome than the smell of death rising from the fresh carnage of a battlefield? Oh, misery! Had we forgotten that this was the *Famine Year*? And we are here in the midst of one of those thousand Golgothas that border our island with a ring of death from Cork

¹⁹ Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 107-08.

all round to Lough Foyle[.] ... [W]e go forward, though with sick hearts and swimming eyes, to examine the Place of Skulls nearer. There is a horrible silence[.] ... [W]e fear to look into any door, though they are all open or off the hinges; for we fear to see yellow chapless skeletons grinning there[.] ... We walk amidst the houses of the Dead, and out at the other side of the cluster, and there is not one where we dare to enter [original emphasis].²⁰

It seems to me that this says more about the writer's attitude to the apocalyptic event of the Famine itself than it does about the experiences of the victims. As Sean Ryder has aptly observed, the point of this type of discourse was not "to 'contain' the world of the Famine within language", but rather "to write about the Famine in a way which would produce certain responses." Thus in spite of its strong affective function, Ryder concludes, "the representational function seems weak."²¹ In Mitchel's writing, the victims are not heard, and only imperfectly seen. They come across not as actors in their own historical reality, but as passive casualties in the "plotted tragedy" staged by the British government. As such, they certainly arouse pity, but the radical otherness which the Gothic attributes to them does not promote empathetic understanding.

Undoubtedly, the horrors of famine were real enough to Mitchel and those of his contemporaries who attempted to narrate them. Asenath Nicholson went so far as to claim that they were "too real" and that "these realities became a dread" for her as the famine worsened.²² It is hardly surprising, then, that witnesses kept referring to "skeletons", "spectres", "walking ghosts" and "the living dead." However, it seems to me that the representation of famine victims requires a more humanized, or humanizing, narrative than that provided by these overworked and ultimately overused metaphors, and I would argue that famine fiction — including O'Flaherty's novel, despite its alleged and perhaps undeniable flaws — is in a position to meet that requirement.

Having said that much, I want to return to Patrick O'Farrell's critique of *Famine*, and specifically what he refers to as O'Flaherty's "encapsulation technique." He argues that this technique, with its focus on the Kilmartin family and their neighbours in Black Valley, does not work because

the sheer enormity of the [Irish Famine] will always threaten to overwhelm and engulf the characters if the attempt is made to use those characters to encompass that event: the event dwarfs the possibilities of the medium.²³

²⁰ "The Famine Year", *Nation*, 19 June 1847.

²¹ Sean Ryder, "Reading Lessons", in Morash and Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities*, p. 161.

²² Asenath Nicholson, *Lights and Shades of Ireland* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1850), p. 330.

²³ O'Farrell, "Whose reality? The Irish Famine in History and Literature", p. 7.

This raises some questions. Firstly, was it O’Flaherty’s intention to “encompass” the whole of the Famine in his novel? This question cannot be answered with any certainty, but the time span of the novel suggests that he was well aware that it could not be done. *Famine* ends in late 1846, after the blight had struck for the second time but the worst was yet to come. Secondly, is it, or should it be, the aim of the historical novel to represent the totality of an event? It might be well to recall what Georg Lukács had to say about this:

[T]he historical novel presents the writer with a specially strong temptation to try and produce an extensively complete totality. The idea that only such completeness can guarantee historical fidelity is a very persuasive one. But it is a delusion[.] ... What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.²⁴

O’Flaherty resisted that temptation, and as I will attempt to show, so did the other novelists with whom the present study is concerned. Whether or not they succeeded with what, for Lukács, was the prime objective of the historical novel remains to be considered.

Thirdly, can *any* historical text which deals with an event as traumatic as the Irish Famine hope to represent its totality? I would answer this question in the negative. As Ann Rigney has suggested, all historical writing, including the historical novel, suffers from chronic imperfection because “representations usually fail to convince in all respects.”²⁵ This, I think, applies to *The Last Conquest of Ireland* as well as to *Famine*. While Mitchel succeeds in conveying a political meaning of the event (again, apart from whether or not it is acceptable as the truth), he fails to convincingly represent the human suffering it involved. Conversely, O’Flaherty may be less than successful in creating artistic unity and in concretizing the immensity of the Famine, but his characters convey something of the reality of starvation, disease and privation in a way that Mitchel’s stylized, anonymous victims do not.

2.1. *Famine*, history and politics

In view of O’Flaherty’s background, it would perhaps not be surprising if *Famine* were to betray a strong nationalist bias, and even to approve Mitchel’s geno-

²⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* [1962] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp. 41-42.

²⁵ Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, p. 4.

cide charge. Born and raised in poverty in a large family on the island of Inishmore, O'Flaherty had personally experienced hunger and the threat of eviction. His father was a staunch nationalist with a rebellious nature, which he passed on to his son. The young Liam involved himself in the Republican movement for a time: while a student at Blackrock College in 1913, he assembled a group of Volunteers from among his schoolmates. But only two years later, he did an about-turn by joining the British army. One explanation he himself offered for this rather sudden change of direction was that he "got tired of waiting for an Irish revolution."²⁶ His career in the army came to an end in 1917 when he was badly wounded and shell-shocked while serving with the Irish Guards in France. Reflecting on his war experience in the autobiographical *Shame the Devil* (1934), he wrote:

Had it not been for my participation in the war, I might still be a petty Irish nationalist, with a carped outlook on life, one of those snivelling patriots who would prefer an Irish dunghill to an English garden in full bloom. Be that as it may, when I came home from the war in 1918, I was regarded as a pariah and a fool and a renegade.²⁷

After a period of recuperation on Inishmore, he spent the next two years (1918-1920) tramping around the world, supporting himself with a variety of jobs. Meanwhile, the "snivelling patriots" had fought in the Easter Rising and in the War of Independence and thus made way for the Irish Free State. Those struggles did not interest O'Flaherty at all at the time, although he was later to write about the Rising in his novel *Insurrection* (1950) and about the Civil War in *The Martyr* (1933).

Disillusioned with the Republican movement, he turned to other ideologies. His interest in socialism, which was awakened while he served in the army, developed into an involvement in Communist activities after his return to Ireland in 1921. This culminated in his making an openly political statement in January 1922, shortly after the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been ratified and the Provisional Government of the Free State established. Accompanied by a group of unemployed men, he occupied the Rotunda building in central Dublin and flew the red flag from the roof. The actual purpose of this action seems to have remained a mystery. According to Michael Conway, a journalist with the *Freeman's Journal*,

²⁶ Quoted in Paul Doyle, *Liam O'Flaherty* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), p. 124 n.16.

²⁷ Quoted in Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1976), p. 65.

[s]ome say that it is a challenge to the Government – others that he has declared an Irish Soviet. My belief, however, is that he just wants to draw the attention of the Government to attend to the desperate plight of the Dublin poor.²⁸

The action was ignored by all political groupings and either condemned or ridiculed by the public at large. After three days, the occupants were ordered to withdraw under the threat of forced eviction. O’Flaherty chose to get out in order to avoid bloodshed, making his escape to Cork. When the Civil War broke out, he again joined the Republicans, this time against the Free State forces, although, as Patrick Sheeran has noted, he does not seem to have been very active.²⁹ Nor did his engagement with the rebel cause at this time last very long. On 28 June 1922, he was in Dublin watching the Free State troops move in on Republican headquarters in O’Connell Street. Having witnessed that, he turned his back on the Civil War and took refuge in England, where he eventually embarked on his career as a writer.

The erstwhile republican/nationalist cum socialist/communist seemed to have abandoned the ideas and ideals of his alternately favoured political movements. Still, as James Cahalan has argued,

[c]ommunism and nationalism were convictions that would color all of O’Flaherty’s writings. Yet he could never totally give himself to “the cause” – neither to Irish Republicanism nor to international socialism.³⁰

The available facts regarding O’Flaherty’s life up until 1930 support this argument in that his political convictions were quite inconstant. His doubts about nationalism surfaced already when he joined the British army in 1915, and during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1930 his faith in socialism similarly faltered as, among other disappointments, he did not find the egalitarian society he had expected.³¹ And yet when, on the outbreak of World War II, Éire’s neutrality was criticized, O’Flaherty the nationalist and anti-imperialist surfaced once again. Speaking in New York in February 1941, he said:

Ireland is already invaded. The culprit ... is George VI, defender of the faith, king of Great Britain and emperor of India. This invasion has been in prog-

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁰ Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 137.

³¹ For O’Flaherty’s account of his Russian sojourn, see *I Went to Russia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931). Later, he amended what he then had come to consider “the criminal mockery of the book” in *Shame the Devil* (London: Grayson & Grayson, 1934); see also Hedda Friberg, *An Old Order and a New: The Split World of Liam O’Flaherty’s Novels* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1996), pp. 49-50.

ress for well over seven hundred years and it still continues, in spite of the lies spread by British propagandists here in America. For well over seven hundred years, the Irish nation has been struggling heroically to hurl the British invaders from its shores. The Irish nation is still struggling to crush that invasion and to regain its lost independence. That is the truth[.] I particularly hate this war which the British ruling class is now waging, in order to keep one fourth of the earth's population under its cruel and barbarous rule. And I include in this subject population, not only the hapless people of India and Africa, but also the unfortunate masses in Great Britain itself[.] ...That ... is my answer to those anti-Irish warmongers in America, who accuse the Irish people of being in league with tyranny and of playing hypnotized rabbit to the German weasel, because they refuse to deliver up their ports and their air bases to Imperial Britain.³²

The O'Flaherty of 1941 appears to have a great deal in common with the Mitchel of eighty years earlier in regard to colonialism/imperialism in general and British oppression of the Irish in particular. But how much of this almost-Mitchelite is there in the author of *Famine*? Can the novel be characterized as an ultra-nationalist text in the spirit of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*? To what extent does it reiterate the interpretation of the Great Famine proposed by Mitchel's text?

Among the cast of characters in O'Flaherty's novel, the ones who come closest to representing Mitchel's ideas are the curate, Fr. Geelan and the weaver, Barney Gleeson. Fr. Geelan in particular strongly condemns British rule and is convinced that the government will do nothing to alleviate the effects of the potato failure. He refers to the colonizer as the "tyrant" who "has stripped us of all our power and devoured our substance,"³³ and his denunciation of food exports echoes that of Mitchel:

The people's grain and their pigs and their oats are gone over the sea, to fill broad English bellies[.] ... [I]t's the people's leaders that are out of their minds, for letting the people's food go out of the country[.] ... There isn't enough food in England to feed the English so Ireland is kept as a granary and a butchery next door. Isn't that their Policy? (120)

When the parish priest, Fr. Roche, expresses his indignation on finding out that the proposals for preventing famine drawn up by the Mansion House Committee have been more or less ignored by the Lord Lieutenant, Fr. Geelan's only comment is that nothing else was to be expected from "a government eager to destroy us as a race" (119). Clearly, he is implying a genocidal intent on the part of the government, but the remark goes unheeded by Fr. Roche. The subject of

³² Quoted in Friberg, *An Old Order and a New*, pp. 222-23.

³³ Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* [1937] (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1989), p. 164. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

genocide is not touched upon again until the penultimate chapter of the novel when, at the gate of the workhouse, the former housekeeper at Crom House, Mary Halloran, is telling another woman about what she witnessed in the town of Clogher on the previous day:

The working men came marching down the street and they carrying flags with words on them. It was shouting for work they were, the creatures. Then they set on a baker's shop and the peelers began to scatter skin and hair. The soldiers came then and drove into the people. The government is going to kill all the poor of the country. So I was told by them that should know. (438)

The vagueness of the reference to "them that should know" as the source of information regarding the government's intentions suggests that this source is an unreliable one, and the other woman's failure to react in any way to Mary's "revelation" indicates that the notion of genocide is not generally entertained by the population at large.

Barney Gleeson, too, blames the colonizer for the miserable state of the Irish people, claiming that "the tyrants have taken the rich land from the people and thrown them to live on the western rocks" (49). But as he sees it, part of the blame attaches to the Irish leaders, especially Daniel O'Connell, for paving the way for the "tyrants:"

I remember when O'Connell and Richard Lalor Shiel [*sic*] started the Catholic Association in 1828, they promised Heaven an' all when Emancipation would be won. We got it and in the following year the landlords, seeing the poor Catholic tenants were voting for them no longer, started the clearances and whole villages were thrown out on the roads. (52)

Here is another Mitchel echo. One condition for Catholic Emancipation, Mitchel had explained, was the abolishment of the forty shilling franchise³⁴, and it meant that the vote was taken away from the great mass of the Catholic peasantry. This in turn meant that the landlords no longer had any political use for the smallholders. So instead of continuing to subdivide farms in order to create more voters, landlords began clearing their land of small tenancies, replacing them with large farms for grazing.³⁵ O'Connell's Repeal Association, too, comes under criticism from Gleeson, who goes so far as to accuse the lead-

³⁴ Tenants who leased land valued at 40 shillings annually were entitled to vote. These tenants, referred to as forty-shilling freeholders, were "a potential source of power to a landlord" since his electoral influence was "in direct proportion to the number of voters on his land" (Hickey and Doherty (eds), *A New Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*, p. 157).

³⁵ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 65-66. See also Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 182, and Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 6, 91.

er of betraying the people who had put their faith in him: “he turned tail at Clontarf, with the victory in his grasp” (52). Gleeson is here referring to the repeal meeting that was to be held at Clontarf outside Dublin on 8 October 1843. Thousands of supporters were already on their way to attend the meeting when the government issued a proclamation banning it and intimating that, if necessary, armed forces would be used to prevent it from taking place. O’Connell chose to abide by the law and called it off. Like Gleeson, Mitchel holds this against O’Connell, arguing that he should have met up with his followers as planned and faced up to the Dublin garrison and police, a force of about five thousand men.³⁶

Gleeson’s criticism of O’Connell is only one instance of the novel’s overall negative representation of the man and his movement. O’Connell is referred to as “the great demagogue” (80) and caricatured in the figure of McCarthy Lalor, the MP who addresses the people on fair day in the village of Crom. Mr. Lalor calls for a stop to the exportation of food and for Irish ports to be opened to importation of foreign foods. He demands that the government buy provisions for relief with “our money, of which we are robbed year after year in excess taxation” and that landlords, through extra taxation, provide the capital for railway building, on which Irish labourers are to be employed.³⁷ He insists that “we are demanding justice, not charity” and intimates that O’Connell will “put forward the plan of the people’s representatives for dealing with this catastrophe.” The “tumultuous cheering” following Lalor’s speech signals the faith that the people have in O’Connell, a faith so strong – or perhaps blind – that they perceive promises where none are actually given:

Those that understood what he had said, and they were not many, were explaining to the others that railways were going to be built, that the landlords were going to pay for the destroyed potatoes, that the government was going to supply food and money. (96)

It is perhaps understandable that, frightened by the prospect of imminent famine, these people clutch at every straw of hope that is offered to them, even to

³⁶ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 39–40.

³⁷ These were some of the demands that were drawn up by the Mansion House Committee, of which O’Connell was a member, and presented to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in November 1845. In his answer, Peel said that he did not doubt that the motive of the Committee was to “aid the Government in the efforts which they are making to avert or mitigate the impending evil”; see *Report of the Mansion House Committee on the Potato Disease* (Dublin: J. Browne, 1846), p. 6. In reality, the government had, so far, done nothing whatever to “avert or mitigate” the coming disaster. The only immediate result of the Committee’s lobbying was the establishment of a relief commission in Dublin.

the point of misconstruing a set of mere proposals (which were to come to almost nothing) as solid pledges. The final comment as the scene closes on Mr. Lalor driving away while the people are “cheering and calling down God’s blessing on his head” suggests that their hopes are futile:

And then they all trooped meekly over to Mr. Chadwick’s [the agent] rent office with the money they had received for that food which was being driven down the road for export, together with the jaunting car of Mr. Lalor, the saviour of the people. (97)

This implies that the people are so completely subjugated by the powers that be that they are unlikely to ever rebel against landlord or government and that their devotion to O’Connell, which is so strong as to elevate him as well as his deputy Lalor to the level of demigods, will not be rewarded. The image of the food and Lalor leaving Crom foreshadows the subsequent failure of O’Connell to do anything to help the starving poor. In the autumn of 1846 when the total loss of the potato crop greatly increased the need for prompt and adequate relief, the Repeal Association was “engaged at Dublin in a foolish quarrel about the advisability of accepting the doctrine of physical force” (372).

Like Mitchel, Barney Gleeson and Fr. Geelan are critical of O’Connell’s refusal to advocate armed rebellion against British rule in Ireland. As Gleeson sees it, the notion that the peaceful agitation preached by O’Connell is going to result in a free Ireland is a delusion which, if pursued, will lead only to ignominious annihilation through oppression and famine:

It’s not talk we want, but powder and ball to drive the tyrants from our holy soil. We should bare our breasts to the bullets and the grape-shot and die like men, instead of dying like sheep in a windy ditch. (53)

Fr. Geelan, too, supports the use of physical force to defend the country against the “brigand”, and he implies that the price people will have to pay for having failed, so far, to put up a fight is suffering and death by famine:

There is nothing holier than to fight in defence of liberty, to die for it, for the freedom of the earth that bore you and the happiness and prosperity of those you love. But that brings suffering; and the cowardly are afraid of suffering. And yet the cowardly can’t escape suffering by shirking the fight. Famine. That’s what’s coming. Famine and death, because the people shirked the fight. (163)

Whereas Mitchel attributes the failure to fight chiefly to the influence of O’Connell’s peace policy, to the warnings (stemming from a total allegiance to that policy) of the Church not to violate it under any circumstances, and to the enfeebled

state of the starving people, Fr. Geelan ascribes it entirely to their cowardice. This seems unduly harsh, especially as the curate himself can be accused of a certain kind of cowardice. He is described as “the type of that gallant priest, who led the Wexford insurgents in arms during the rebellion of 1798” (117), but the analogy seems a bit off the mark. At the outbreak of the rebellion, Fr. John Murphy initially obeyed his bishop and urged his people to surrender their arms and swear loyalty to King George III. The ruthlessness with which the Wexford yeomanry and militia enforced martial law soon drove Fr. Murphy to defy the bishop and lead his parishioners into the fight. When the rebels were eventually defeated by the King’s forces, Fr. Murphy was captured, sentenced to death and hanged.³⁸

Fr. Geelan would very likely have the courage to “die a soldier’s death” in a fight against the “tyrants.” But he is not quite bold enough to defy his superior and the Church by actively stirring up rebellion. When the blight strikes for the second time in 1846 and the whole potato crop is lost, Fr. Geelan is convinced that his people are slowly but surely going to starve to death. Desperate to do something, he tells Fr. Roche that “the hour has come to strike.” Appalled, the parish priest reminds his curate of the Repeal Association’s “total disclaimer of physical force, violence or breach of the law.” Arguing that there is no law that “forbids the destitute to sustain life,” Fr. Geelan announces that he has “decided to call upon the people to fight for their rights.”

“With what, you fool?” cried Father Roche. “With their fists against bayonets? You’re mad. I forbid you to stir a hand, or foot, or to speak a word. I’ll have you defrocked.”

The curate drew himself to his full height, stared at his superior fiercely, and then relaxed. He bowed his head, shook, and muttered:

“Maybe you’re right. But if you are, this is the beginning of the end for the Church. If the Church can’t lead her flock to battle in the cause of justice and liberty, then she must make room for those who can. (321-22)

Whether it is the threat of being defrocked, or some subconscious awareness that the unarmed people do not stand a chance against police and soldiery that causes Fr. Geelan to retreat is unclear, but the prospect of suspension does seem to have a deterring effect on him. When he eventually does defy Fr. Roche, it is an unpremeditated act provoked by a blind rage directed at the police who, armed with bayonets, are preventing the two priests and their people from approaching the authorities with a request to have the food depots opened. Call-

³⁸ S. J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 391.

ing on the men to follow him, Fr. Geelan throws himself into a foray which ends even before it has begun. The people are held back by Fr. Roche and their own eagerness to “avoid contact with the bayonets” (325), and the curate, in tears of impotent fury, is forced to admit defeat.

O’Flaherty does not condemn Fr. Geelan for submitting to the will of the parish priest. The curate is “a voice crying alone in the wilderness; a revolutionary soldier disarmed by the soutane which he wore and by the mitred felons to whom he had vowed obedience” (391). This assessment of Fr. Geelan’s predicament is attributed to Dr. Hynes, but it seems inconsistent with the Catholic doctor’s character to think of bishops as “mitred felons.” Instead, it fits with O’Flaherty’s anticlericalism and his disassociation from Roman Catholicism, which emerged and grew during his years as a postulant at Rockwell College. While there, he came to “deplore the religious authoritarianism and puritanism which were commonplace in Ireland” and to feel that “many of the religious beliefs being inculcated were mere superstitions.”³⁹ In *A Tourist’s Guide to Ireland*, O’Flaherty writes of the parish priest:

He is practically master of the body and soul of every individual[.] ... From their first yell at birth until the sod falls on them in their grave their actions and thoughts are under his direction[.] ... He knows what is passing in their minds, how to overawe them with threats of hell, or to enthuse them with promises of indulgences and eternal happiness.⁴⁰

The curates, on the other hand, “are of no consequence. They are poor. They are under the thumb of their parish priest.”⁴¹ Mitchel commended those priests who, as he put it, felt the wrongs of their country and “burnt to redress or avenge them.” At the same time, he regretted that there were too few of them to make a difference and denounced the majority for failing to support Young Ireland in their attempt to rebel:

When the final scene opened ... and the whole might of the empire was gathering itself to crush us, the clergy, as a body, were found on the side of the enemy [...] ... [A]nd having taken their part, they certainly did the enemy’s business well.⁴²

Fr. Roche’s negative attitude to violence of any kind and to the idea of withholding rents and keeping the harvest as preached by Mitchel and James Fintan

³⁹ Doyle, *Liam O’Flaherty*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Liam O’Flaherty, *A Tourist’s Guide to Ireland* [1929] (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998), pp. 19-20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴² Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 197-98.

Lalor places him in this category of priests gone over to the enemy. We are told that he

continually advised the people, from the altar and elsewhere, to have confidence in the government, to obey the law and not to listen to agitators, "Young Irishlanders, Fenians and that criminal gang of physical force men." (206)⁴³

By endowing Fr. Roche with these principles of non-violence, O'Flaherty seems to uphold the ultra-nationalist view held by Mitchel, Davitt and others that the Catholic clergy were to blame for compelling their people to follow the dictates of O'Connell and the Church.

But if Fr. Roche is an O'Connellite when it comes to the question of violence, he is quite the Mitchelite in some other respects. The view that England is and has been robbing Ireland is as firm a conviction with the priest as it is with Mitchel. "Livid with rage", he reads aloud from a newspaper article listing Irish grievances:

England takes five million pounds from us every year in rent alone. As rent for the land she robbed and holds by the law of the brigand, by the law of the bayonet and of the grape-shot[.] ... She takes three million quarters of grain every year. She takes one million head of cattle, sheep and swine. And now, when the poor Irish people, who supply her with this wealth, year after year, have lost the potato crop on which she forces them to live, she talks of charity. We want justice. Justice! We want our own. (116-17)

The same insistence that Ireland needs, and should have, her own produce and not alms propels Mitchel's relentless criticism of the relief measures. And like Mitchel, Fr. Roche points up the inadequacy of the relief works. "The government goose", he proclaims,

has only laid a wren's egg and a mangy one at that. A wren's egg stuffed with yellow meal[.] ... There's only work for three hundred altogether. The people's own money, borrowed at five percent, is going to be put to no good use. (192-93)

For someone who preaches confidence in the government, Fr. Roche does not show much evidence of having any. Coercive measures rather than relief seem to him to be the government's priority, and coercion infuriates him as much as it does Mitchel. He upbraids the district inspector and his police force for threatening innocent people with bayonets and denounces the soldiers sent to

⁴³ Here, O'Flaherty is guilty of anachronism, as the revolutionary society that came to be popularly known as the Fenians was not established until 1858.

quell the alleged riots as “a licentious rabble” (290). And yet he also chastises his parishioners for provoking the authorities by committing outrages such as flinging stones at the bailiff or stealing cattle from landlords. “These are un-Christian acts”, he reminds them,

but there might be some excuse for them on account of the idleness of the government, not giving the people work, and they starving. At the same time, the people who commit these outrages should be horse-whipped through the parish for giving the government an excuse to bring in coercion acts. (155)

When Fr. Roche warns his curate against incitement to violence, he backs up the argument by referring to the Repeal Association’s disclaimer, the “ordinances of the eternal God” and the “inviolable loyalty to our most gracious and ever-beloved sovereign, Queen Victoria” (321). In other words, he appeals to Fr. Geelan’s faith and obedience, his duties to Church and state. When warning his parishioners, on the other hand, he appeals to their instinct for self-preservation by emphatically declaring that “violent conduct” will lead to certain “disaster” (236). In doing so, he is not catering to the O’Connellite creed but giving vent to his greatest fear: that provocation in any form will cause the government to “send their soldiers to massacre the poor defenceless people” (121). Such a fear seems to have been one of the reasons for some priests to reject the use of physical force. As Fr. Philip Fitzgerald explained after having tried to persuade the rebels at Ballingarry in 1848 not to attack the police:

[T]hat there should be carnage at all was much to be lamented, but that it should be ... especially on the side of a poor and oppressed population, with whom all my sympathies were enlisted, and with whom I in every way identified, was an idea from which I recoiled instinctively.⁴⁴

When it becomes clear to Fr. Roche that violence is perceived even where none is intended and unarmed supplicants are met with bayonets, he is overcome by “an impotent rage of defeat” which forces him to reconsider his stance on physical force. He realizes that

it was the policy of “peace at any price,” preached by him and by all the other priests and politicians in command of the great Repeal Association, that had produced this catastrophe, a disillusioned, disheartened, disorganised people at the mercy of the tyrannical government. A few short months ago, less than a year ago, if the bugles of war had been sounded, a million men would have been ready, armed with the frenzy of revolutionary faith, to crush the feudal robbers that oppressed them. But the demagogue O’Connell had pro-

⁴⁴ Quoted in Kerr, *The Catholic Church and the Famine*, p. 66.

fessed himself a pacifist and a loyal subject of Her Majesty. The bishops also preached peace and obedience to the laws that gave them fat bellies and rich vestments and palaces. All those in command said that life must be spared and that no cause was worth the shedding of a single man's blood. Now that blood was going to rot in starved bodies; bodies that would pay for the sin of craven pacifism the punishment that has always been enforced by history. (327-28)

Some critics have claimed that this thinking is inconsistent with Fr. Roche's viewpoints, more characteristic of the author's own attitude and, therefore, implausible.⁴⁵ I think that this claim needs some qualification. It is probably fair to say, as Paul Doyle does, that it would hardly occur to a conservative and a defender of the position of the Church like Fr. Roche to think of the bishops in terms of "fat bellies and rich vestments and palaces." Here again, O'Flaherty's anticlericalism gets the better of his objectivity. Also, it might be argued that a Catholic priest would not be inclined to refer to O'Connell, the great Liberator, as a "demagogue." On the other hand, I do not find it inconceivable that, faced with the growing hopelessness of the situation of the poor, his own powerlessness to help them and his exasperation with government policies, even a Fr. Roche might begin to question the validity of rejecting armed resistance. By 1847, a number of priests had become disillusioned enough with the government's handling of the famine crisis to engage in open and severe criticism. At the same time, they were becoming increasingly uncertain about the tenability of the non-violence argument. As one curate from County Cavan put it, it was "hard to teach patience to a man who sees his father and mother or wife and children driven from the houses of their ancestors, to the bogs and ditches, to starvation and death."⁴⁶ In 1848, priests became involved in recruiting members for the Confederate clubs which, under the influence of the most radical Young Irelanders, were becoming ever more militant.⁴⁷ Inspired by the revolutions in Europe, where many clergymen sided with the rebels, several Irish priests declared themselves ready to take up arms in order to rid the country of British rule. Even Bishop Maginn of Derry seems to have lost patience with moral force. "Sooner than allow the misery of my people to continue", he declared, "I would rather grasp the cross and the green flag of Ireland and rescue my country, or perish with its people."⁴⁸ If a bishop can seriously conceive of

⁴⁵ Doyle, *Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 101-02; Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 147.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kerr, *The Catholic Church and the Famine*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ For the origins and development of the Confederate clubs, see Gary Owens, "Popular mobilisation and the rising of 1848: the clubs of the Irish Confederation", in Laurence Geary (ed.), *Remembrance and Rebellion in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 51-63.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Kerr, *The Catholic Church and the Famine*, p. 65.

going so totally against the dictates of his church, then surely a priest who is a daily witness to the misery of his parishioners could do likewise.

Bishop Maginn did not grasp the green flag, nor does Fr. Roche become an agitator for armed rebellion. The priest's vacillation is symptomatic of the ambivalence I find in the novel's overall treatment of resistance. Does O'Flaherty really endorse violent rebellion, as some critics have argued,⁴⁹ and, if so, how and by whom does he expect such action to be carried out among a dispirited peasantry who have no political organization whatsoever? Young Ireland is apparently not the answer. Elsewhere, O'Flaherty has written of Irish revolutionary groups that

the activities of these groups never lead any further than conversation, unless it be some utterly purposeless act committed by what Dostoevsky called the 'Contemplatives': those fellows who meditate for years and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, burn a house, murder a man, or go on a pilgrimage to Lourdes or Jerusalem. Of revolutionary groups, with constructive programmes and with leaders that are clear-thinking and ambitious men, the tourist will see no sign here.⁵⁰

The Young Irelanders appearing in *Famine* reflect the ineffectiveness and the vagueness of purpose which O'Flaherty ascribes to all such groups. At the meeting in Crom village where McCarthy Lalor feeds the people false hopes, there also appear two Young Ireland speakers, Considine and Dillon. Dwelling on the "historic struggle for freedom of this great and ancient people" (97), they receive scant attention. It is implied that, to the listeners, the struggle for freedom is of little or no importance compared with the struggle for survival. Still, a few of them are inclined to believe that following Young Ireland on the path to rebellion is the key to eventual survival: "Didn't you hear what Mr. Considine said about baring our breasts to the grape shot in the defence of the country", one of them insists. But Barney Gleeson scorns the notion that Young Ireland will stage a rising: "Devil damn the bit they'll do only talk. They will do nothing. You mark my words" (102-03).

For Thomsy Hynes, on the other hand, Young Ireland becomes the shining light in a world of increasing darkness. Sent by Mary Kilmartin to take a message to her husband, Martin, who is "on his keeping" in one of the western islands, he comes back not with tidings of Martin, but with a story of having come upon a "big man with yellow hair", a Young Irishman and "a bold hero", holding forth to a group of prospective rebels:

⁴⁹ Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 147; Doyle, *Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 102.

⁵⁰ O'Flaherty, *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland*, pp. 52-53.

[He] said there were going to be clubs started all over the country, to fight for a republic in Ireland, to drive out the Queen's men and to get freedom for the poor people. Liberty, he said, was going to be made the law all over the world[.] ... [H]e had powerful talk. He said that the clubs would go out among the soldiers in the regiments and tell them why they should side with the people[.] ... More power to that talk, I said to myself[.] ... Blood and thunder! He said the people were to be stirred up by these clubs and all joined into an army[.] ... [I]t was fine talk ... and it looked an easy job of work, the way he told it. He said there are millions of the poor people and only a few of the rich, and if the poor got together and made themselves into a proper army, with a proper plan[.] ... and knew what they wanted to do and stuck together[.] ... they'd make short work of the tyrants. Then there would be liberty all over the world and no hunger on anybody. Landlords, he said, would be shot down like rabbits when the moment came. (385-86)

The impressionable Thomsy is completely taken in by what this man had to say; it was "the finest talk you ever heard. Listening to him, you would think the battle was won" (387). He reads the man's message as one of hope and, inspired by that hope, he does not question one word of what he has heard. O'Flaherty's disdain of the Young Irelanders as organizers of armed rebellion is apparent in the way this episode is represented. For example, Barney Gleeson's assertion that Young Ireland will do nothing but talk is echoed in Thomsy's story, where the word "talk" appears time and again. "Talk" reduces rebellion to "an easy job of work", a preposterous notion in the light of failed attempts from 1798 onward, including the one made by Young Ireland in 1848. Equally preposterous seems the idea of "a proper army" of the poor at a time when contemporary observers reported how whole armies of destitute, emaciated and sick people were haunting the countryside and swarming into the towns in search of food and shelter.

Before long, Thomsy's hopes are dashed by harsh reality. On the day after his return, he awakes from a "glorious dream" involving the man with yellow hair leading an army of the people, including Thomsy himself, to victory:

In one hand he carried a landlord's head, from which blood dripped. In the other hand he carried a flashing sword, with which he pointed towards the horizon where the golden spears of the rising sun were shining brilliantly. He was pointing towards the land of plenty, which lay beyond the summit of the mountain. (399)

But just as they are about to reach the summit, Thomsy hears a voice which leaves him "rooted to the ground" while the rest of the people sweep past him towards their goal. The voice is Mary's, shouting: "He has the plague. He is all

covered with spots like a pig.” As reality intrudes, Thomsy’s faith in the man and his “powerful talk” begins to falter:

Here, in the darkness of the loft, there was no sign of the glorious sun rising on the land of plenty. It was horrible to realise that the man with the yellow hair was just a dream. So were the soldiers, saying they would not fire on their own flesh and blood. So was the great multitude of marching men and women. (400)

Mary is actually referring to Dr. Hynes who has contracted typhus, but it turns out that Thomsy, too, has been infected. In fits of delirium, snatches of his dream return, sometimes true to the original, sometimes distorted, suggesting that dreams can be deceptive:

[T]he internal tumult had returned. The horde of people marching up the mountain were now shouting abuse at him[.] ... Now the man with the yellow hair stood out against the horizon with his sword, but he had no land-lord’s head. He was smiling mysteriously. (407)

In the end, Thomsy is nevertheless granted his glorious dream:

Now there was no more pain[.] ... [T]he man with the yellow hair stood on the mountain top, his naked sword flashing in the spears of the rising sun. Now the great horde of marching people called him and he went with them, marching through the sweet-smelling heather to the summit of the promised land. (409)

It is a dream doomed to die, like Thomsy and so many others, killed by famine. And yet when O’Flaherty whisks Mary, Martin and their baby off to America, it is only with the help of the Young Irelanders that they are enabled to escape. In spite of his critical attitude to the performance of Young Ireland during the Famine, O’Flaherty is forced to recognize that they provided the initial impetus to the revolutionary spirit which motivated the Fenians, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Land League, to culminate in the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Hence the “cries of future vengeance” raised from the departing emigrant ship.

With the O’Connellites dismissed as useless blatherskites and Irish revolutionaries in general relegated to the category of “Contemplatives”, O’Flaherty champions the peasants as the real patriots and rebels. Here and there, he writes, one will see

some brave soul standing up and crying out the gospel of revolt and salvation[.] ... And it is through the fiery eyes of these rebels that the Irish peasant must really be seen and not through his dirt, his hunger, his apathy and

the helpless hands that he waves despairingly at the sky[.] ... These voices crying from the depths of hell shall bring up great forces of revolt, armed with the great wisdom of the damned, and they shall spread over the land and inhabit it with free men and women.⁵¹

This was written in 1929, and it seems that the peasants' situation has not changed substantially since the eighteen-forties. Dirt, hunger, apathy and helplessness still typify their lives. Although a partially successful national revolution has resulted in the establishment of the Free State, a social revolution remains to be carried out. O'Flaherty insists that it is the peasants who must revolt and fight for change since the priests and the politicians are busy resisting it. In *Famine*, the situation is comparable. The O'Connellites are concerned mostly with the repeal of the Union, which would essentially mean reinstatement of an Irish parliament on the 1782 model. Young Ireland, on the other hand, insist on total independence, an Irish republic, and neither of the two groups can or will explain how achieving their goal would help to stay the famine. For O'Flaherty, social injustice rather than imperial tyranny is the chief cause of the peasants' misery. Although it might be argued that, in many respects, the former is a direct consequence of the latter, the attempted revolt of the peasants in *Famine* is aimed specifically at social injustice in the form of the local tyrant, the land agent, and not at the government. It is Chadwick's demand for rents that they see as the most serious threat to their survival, and the fact that the absentee landlord is the ultimate recipient of their shillings is neither here nor there.

The description of what triggers the revolt of the Black Valley peasants reaffirms O'Flaherty's belief that social and political change must spring from the nameless masses. Having assured the tenants that the government will grant a postponement of rent payments, Fr. Roche suddenly announces that the rents must be paid. Feeling deserted and disappointed, the people take matters into their own hands. At this point, there is a shift into first person narrative which heightens the impression that the author himself is speaking:

I am certain that, apart from whispered propaganda by a few militants from the town, no definite organization had been established in the parish. It was a spontaneous movement on the part of the people; one of those silent and sudden movements of rebellion that spring from the earth itself. The peasant can endure tyranny longer than any other class of the community; but when the moment arrives for him to rebel, he needs no outside forces to rouse him. His rebellion is instinctive. (236-37)

⁵¹ O'Flaherty, *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland*, pp. 79-80.

This seems an encouraging beginning, and some readers might be led to expect something positive to come out of the peasants' action. But there is no "proper army" nor any "proper plan", and the attempted rebellion is quickly suppressed. Although the men who set out towards Crom House seem united and determined enough in their purpose, their resolve soon collapses under the onslaught of fear. Hesitation sets in when Barney Gleeson, brandishing his pike, joins the crowd shouting: "Bare your breasts to the bullets. Quick march. Long live Ireland[.] ... Left, right, left. Down with the tyrants" (237). We are told that the crowd "did their best to fall into step with him" but that "it was noticeable that their enthusiasm diminished after his appearance" (237-38). As Crom House looms into sight, fear overcomes many of them:

At sight of the house, a small portion of the crowd took to flight. Others called on them to stand fast, but even some of those took to flight[.] ... Nearly a hundred men took to their heels in this way and then stood hidden among the trees at a distance[.] ... The sight of the lord's residence brought to their minds the consciousness of their serfdom and the power of the ruling class. (238)

The implication here is that the power of the ruling class is no reason to shun the fight. Like Mitchel, O'Flaherty is barely able to hide his urge to put at least part of the blame for their "serfdom" on the peasants themselves.

Although the men start for Crom House armed with sticks and singing revolutionary songs, they are not specifically out to launch an attack but to plead with the agent not to take the rent. This becomes quite clear when, before anyone else has a chance to say or do anything, Gleeson attempts to attack Chadwick but is held back by Martin Kilmartin. Furious at being thwarted, Gleeson shouts: "Let me get at him. I'll stick my pike through his guts. There stands the tyrant that ruined my daughter. I'll take vengeance off him" (238). Gleeson is not there to support the united effort to have the rents waived, but for purely personal reasons. He blames Chadwick for ruining his daughter, Ellie, by making her his "fancy woman." But his desire for revenge stems less from the ruination of Ellie than from the damage done to himself:

"Never again will I be able to hold up my head", he thought . "No man'll listen to me with respect." ... A wild desire for vengeance entered his mind ... and he felt a melancholy happiness, as if he were going to give his life for a cause. (157)

The "cause" is really his own and, as such, not very likely to "bring up great forces of revolt." On the contrary, it proves all but fatal to himself, disastrous to his family, and it gives the authorities one more reason to tighten their grip.

As might be expected, Chadwick refuses outright even to contemplate a waiver of rents. When the men, kneeling before him, appeal to him once more, their supplication only serves to enrage him to the point where he strikes Martin with his riding crop. This in turn sets off the crowd of highly strung men, and in the ensuing fight, Chadwick receives a fair beating. The arrival of forty policemen with carbines rekindles Gleeson's fury, and he rushes at them with his pike, wounding one constable. This "mad daring", we are told,

spurred the people to a similar effort. They rushed in on the police with their sticks. A fierce battle ensued, lasting for over twenty minutes, before the superior discipline of the police managed to put the crowd to flight. (242)

And what is achieved? Nothing, at the cost of six men and four policemen wounded, over twenty men thrown into jail, and "a large number of young men ... on their keeping in the mountains" (256). Gleeson's "mad daring" turns him into a public hero about whom people take to singing the ballad of "The Bould Barney Gleeson." (255) Thomsy Hynes, very much taken with Gleeson's "heroism" tells the man's wife:

Lord save us, in this land of woe, it is a great thing to be related to a man that had the courage to strike a blow. Even to throw a stone at a barrack window would be a gorgeous thing. And many a poor man that will have to die of hunger in a windy ditch would die the better of that flung stone[.] ... It's boasting of your husband you should be, Ellen, instead of crying, and he a notorious hero. (256)

Understandably, Ellen is not inclined to boast, being left to fend for herself in the midst of famine when her husband is sentenced to transportation for life. His "heroism" demands one more family sacrifice. Determined not to allow Chadwick to testify against his father, Patrick murders the agent and is himself killed by his dying victim.

The fact that Gleeson's "heroism" is presented as a form of derangement, as indicated by the "ticking of a clock" in his head saying "Kill the tyrant. Kill the tyrant" (158), suggests that O'Flaherty rejected heroic action and sacrifice. Thomsy's naïve ideas of heroism as revealed by his admiration of Gleeson and the Young Irelanders are further signs of that rejection. Yet O'Flaherty cannot seem to let go completely of his faith in violent rebellion. The failed revolt results in growing "government terrorism", but still "the spirit of rebellion increased among the peasants instead of diminishing" (255). This echoes Mitchel's stubborn insistence that "there is in the Irish nature a wonderful spring and an intense vitality: insomuch that I believe, even now, the chances of a successful

insurrection in '48 to have been by no means desperate."⁵² But the peasants of Black Valley stand no chance of defeating Chadwick. He carries out his threat of taking their livestock for rent but does not stop at that. Evictions follow, and the spirit of rebellion begins to fizzle out. After the blight strikes for the second time and the failure of the potato crop is total, there seems to be nothing much of that spirit left. Fr. Geelan's effort to rouse the people into forcing their way to the government food depot to demand justice is fruitless, and "when the police began to advance with their bayonets pointed for attack, the stampede began" (326). There is no sign now of that spontaneous movement of rebellion which, mystically, springs "from the earth itself." In this novel, then, there is a marked ambivalence regarding violent rebellion which manifests itself as both affirmation and negation and thus creates what Wayne Booth would call a "dis-harmony between idea and dramatized object."⁵³ The author, or the idealist in him, holds on to this mystical notion of rebellion, but the story itself pulls the other way. In this respect, the novel reflects O'Flaherty's own ambivalent attitude to politics.

2.2. Famine – whose fault?

There is a similar ambivalence in the novel's treatment of the issue of culpability. While Mitchel leaves readers in no doubt as to who, in his opinion, are chiefly to blame for the Famine and its tragic consequences, O'Flaherty delivers no such clear-cut indictment of the British government even though his anti-imperialist mind-set may have tempted him to do so. There is an apparent conflict between O'Flaherty's attempt to be objective and his compulsion to pass personal judgments. Just as the voice of O'Flaherty the anti-cleric and pro-revolutionary manages to break through on occasion, so does that of O'Flaherty the anti-imperialist. At one point, the author intrudes to accuse the government in a manner very reminiscent of Mitchel:

When government is an expression of the people's will, a menace to any section of the community rouses the authorities to protective action. Under a tyranny, the only active forces of government are those of coercion. Unless the interests of the ruling class are threatened, authority remains indifferent. We have seen how the feudal government acted with brutal force when the interests of the landowner were threatened, even to the extent of plundering the poor people's property. Now it remains to be seen what that same government did when those poor lost, by the act of God, all that was left

⁵² Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 197.

⁵³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 182.

to them by the police and Mr. Chadwick – the potato crop which they had sown. (324)

Here, O’Flaherty has obvious difficulties with restraining his anger at the injustices his own people were forced to suffer. His failure to refrain from passing judgment on the government jeopardizes the sense of objectivity which has been established by the novel’s focus on the characters’ various opinions as to who or what to blame for their predicament – if, indeed, there is cause for blame at all. The references to tyranny, coercion and the brutal force of the feudal government suggest that O’Flaherty is inclined to share Mitchel’s view of government culpability. And yet this authorial outburst does not manage to undermine the impression conveyed by the characters, that Mitchel’s claim that the English created the famine is too simplistic. As Margaret Kelleher has noted, the passage acknowledges the “convergence of multiple factors in producing famine – political oppression, social injustice and providential disaster.”⁵⁴

In my opinion, social injustice emerges as the most pertinent of those factors when the question of blame is raised by the characters in the novel. For most of the poor inhabitants of Black Valley, political oppression is an abstraction, whereas they do recognize that social injustice in various forms is an underlying cause of their increasingly desperate situation. Although characters like Gleeson and Fr. Roche make a connection between long-term political oppression and the emergence of famine, they do not lay all of the blame at the door of the British government. Gleeson holds the social system largely responsible for poverty and famine because it allows the upper classes to exploit the poor, leaving them with no means of improving their situation:

What have the people got now, as a result of all their struggling in the last years? How can they improve the land when it’s not belonging to them? They have to give everything that grows on it to the landlords and the ministers except the few miserable potatoes they eat to keep them alive. Their rents are raised if they improve the sod that belonged to their ancestors[.] ... They have to live in dirt, for fear the drivers would report them to have money and raise their exactions. (52-53)

This criticism of a system in which economic oppression of the cultivators is the prerogative of the proprietors echoes that of contemporary observers and commentators such as Alexander Somerville and Sidney Godolphin Osborne. Somerville found it deplorable that the “idle, dissolute and impoverished proprietary classes exact, and compulsively extract, from the cultivators all their

⁵⁴ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 137.

capital, the improving cultivator only being a mark for the landlord's cupidity." Osborne maintained that "some check must be put upon that reckless abuse of the rights of property" which leads to the ruin of so many tenants "from whom, by a course of many years hard exaction, immense incomes were drawn in better times."⁵⁵

As Gleeson sees it, the landlords' greed for economic gain is such that, even with famine in the land, their self-interest precludes any consideration for the welfare of their tenants:

To hell or Connaught, Cromwell the murderer used to say. Nowadays, begob, the gentry are clearing the people out of Connaught itself, into the grave or the workhouse, or the emigrant ship. It's America now, instead of Connaught, to die of hunger in the New York dives, or to be thrown to the wild Indians on the plains of the west. (52)

But Gleeson's concept of "the tyrant" comprises more than the colonizer as embodied in the Protestant landlord and his agent; there are tyrants also among his own people. Having fled from "the hunger" in his home county of Sligo, Gleeson is helped to a new life in Black Valley by the Protestant minister who gives him a plot of land "after many a fine gentleman of my own holy persuasion had turned me from his door with an empty hand and a sick heart" (51). Apparently, those Protestant landowners who tended to be callous and indifferent or cruel towards their social inferiors had their counterparts among those of the Catholic faith. Contemporary testimony affirms that Gleeson's censure of upper-class Catholics is not unfounded. For example, in April 1848, the parish priest of Ballintubber, County Mayo, lamented that his people had been "starved to death. The landlords of all sects and creeds conspired for their extinction – the Catholic landlords the most cruelly disposed." Even Mitchel, solicitous as he is to lay all the blame on the colonizer, concedes that the Catholic gentry was "the very worst class, perhaps, of the Irish aristocracy."⁵⁶ Like a number of other contemporaries, he attributes the hostility of tenants towards their landlords to class rather than religion, and so does O'Flaherty.

In Gleeson's opinion, the landowners are not the only oppressors of the poor in the hierarchy of Irish society. The local shopkeeper, he argues, can be the worst of them all. When Patch Hernon remarks that the Protestant minister can afford to be generous since he "steals from the people with his tithes", Gleeson

⁵⁵ Somerville, *Letters from Ireland*, p. 98; Sidney Godolphin Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland* (London: T. & W. Boone, 1850), p. 209.

⁵⁶ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 306; Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 147.

reminds him that neither generosity nor meanness is determined by religious creed:

It would be as easy for him to be mean like the rest of them as to be generous. Don't they all rob the people? Who is a greater robber than the Catholic gombeen man, as soon as he gets his foot on the neck of his own flesh and blood. We have an example down there in Crom, Johnny Hynes, that got rich on account of the Repeal Movement, with the Repealers boycotting the Protestant shopkeepers. (51-52) ⁵⁷

The son of a murdered informer, Hynes has, against all odds, managed to work his way up on the social ladder in the wake of O'Connell's nationalist movement. When the Protestant shopkeeper of Crom is driven out of business, Hynes takes over the premises to become "next to the landlord, the most powerful man in the parish" (80). Hardened by the humiliations he was forced to suffer in childhood because of his father's "crime", he becomes a greedy and cunning man who quickly realizes what an opportunity for profit the potato failure provides for an enterprising person like himself. The government's refusal to interfere with private trade and their proposals for relief work are "hailed with delight" by Hynes:

Like a vulture, that soars in ecstasy over a battlefield, he took delight in the people's misery, since that misery was going to put money into his pocket. All the money the people got from the relief works would cross the counter of his shop. (178)

Calling down blessings on both the famine and the government, he proceeds to buy up cheap "yellow meal" imported from America, which he then sells at a considerable profit to those who have managed to obtain work or who still have some means left for buying meal. This profiteering infuriates the parson, Mr. Coburn, who insists that the meal "should be distributed by the government at cost price" and that "the hunger of the poor should not be used as a means of filling the coffers of usurers" (207). Even Hynes's own son, the doctor, calls him a robber and a miser when he finds out that his father has refused credit to those who have not been given relief work and, therefore, are penniless. Hynes defends himself against all such accusations, claiming that he cannot afford to sell for less and that he will never be paid if he sells on credit. When Fr. Roche admonishes him for not being "a good Catholic", Hynes's reaction reveals that he has neither forgotten nor forgiven past wrongs: "It's my money", he shouts,

⁵⁷ Here, O'Flaherty has Gleeson using a word he would not have known. The word and concept of boycotting came into use in the autumn of 1880, at the time of the Land War.

“that I gathered together, penny by penny all these years, while the loafers that now want credit from me were pelting me with stones” (333). Although O’Flaherty describes Hynes in terms of the archetypal miser, he also acknowledges the significance of the man’s background in the shaping of his character: “All he thought of was getting power, so that he might have ‘satisfaction’ for those contumelies he had suffered as a child” (133). The parvenu’s indifference to the hardships of “loafers” and “ruffians” and his refusal to be charitable because he fears slipping back into poverty are perhaps humanly understandable. But it is difficult to condone this blatant profiteering even though it is made possible by government policy, and the important questions O’Flaherty raises here are whether Hynes’s conduct can be defended morally and to what extent it exacerbates the suffering of the poor.

The “gombeen man” is not a purely fictional character, and profiteering seems to have been a fairly common phenomenon during the Famine. In a diary entry of March 1846, Elizabeth Smith wrote:

The managers who buy up the flour and meal and sell it out in the very small quantities the labourers can only buy, nearly double the cost price on the poor purchaser, and if they give credit, charge usurious interest besides – a system that ruins hundreds.⁵⁸

In September that same year, the parish priest of Swinford, County Mayo, complained that “private vendors have raised the price of meal beyond the reach of the poor”, adding that “private credit, which even the poorest enjoyed to some extent heretofore, is totally stopped.”⁵⁹ In October, when the merchants had been assured that the government was not intending to interfere with private trade, the *Waterford Freeman* declared that merchants were “already counting their gains, and gloating over the misery by which they hope to enrich themselves.”⁶⁰ Travelling in Galway in 1847, W.E. Forster of the Society of Friends deplored that, in the remote districts of that county, people were often forced to buy meal “from the small hucksters, at an advance of as much as thirty per cent above the market price.”⁶¹ Even Thomas Carlyle, usually unsympathetic to the Irish poor, expressed his indignation at some country dealers profiting “by workhouse grocery and meal trade, by secret pawnbroking – by *eating* the slain” [original emphasis].⁶² Some government officials, too, were aware that

⁵⁸ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 90.

⁵⁹ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 76.

⁶⁰ *Waterford Freeman*, 3 October 1846.

⁶¹ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 158.

⁶² Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 378.

Irish merchants were taking advantage of the free trade policy. In a letter to Prime Minister Russell in January 1847, Bessborough, the Lord Lieutenant, wrote:

I cannot make my mind up entirely about the merchants. I know all the difficulties that arise when you begin to interfere with trade, but it is difficult to persuade a starving population that one class should be permitted to make 50 per cent profit by the sale of provisions whilst they are dying in want of these.⁶³

Comments such as these suggest that characters like Hynes were actually to be found among merchants and shopkeepers in many parts of Ireland, although there are testimonials to the contrary as well. As in the case of landlords, there were also beneficent shopkeepers, corn merchants and millers who did all they could to help the starving. In *Famine*, the Irish gombeen man is strongly implicated as partly responsible for subjecting the poor to starvation, while *The Last Conquest of Ireland* ignores the issue of profiteering entirely. Obviously, it would have undermined Mitchel's claim that all responsibility for the Famine rested with the British government.

In Mitchel's reading of the Famine, the failure of the relief efforts is ascribed entirely to politics. O'Flaherty's novel, by contrast, emphasizes the social mismanagement which, in addition to the government's strictures, complicated the distribution of food and the implementation of the public works. The Crom relief committee, headed by a government representative and the resident magistrate, is composed of Johnny Hynes, Fr. Roche, Mr. Coburn, and three illiterate, yet fairly prosperous farmers. Fraught by antagonisms and disagreements, this committee proves all but useless. The shopkeeper strives only to ensure his profits, which are safe so long as food is not sold at cost price from government depots. The three farmers oppose all schemes on the grounds that they are not "within the meaning of the [public works] act", which they cannot even read. Mr. Swan is concerned only with adhering to government regulations, and the magistrate, Colonel Bodkin, is simply "bored with the whole business" (193). Hynes's greed for profit combined with rising prices eventually make it impossible for the poor to buy food, especially if they have been refused relief work. The farmers are implicated in taking bribes and favouring their own class in granting tickets for the works. The engineer overseeing relief work has to return "presents of game, even sacks of potatoes ... sent as bribes" (228), and people are well aware that many "well-to-do" persons are employed because "they have

⁶³ Quoted in Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 82.

powerful friends” (208). Consequently, the lower classes who are the most susceptible to famine – and who have no representation on the committee which is ostensibly formed to aid them – have to contend with ever diminishing chances of survival because of corruption, jobbery and mismanagement on the local level. But for the same reason that he makes no mention of profiteering by Irish merchants and shopkeepers, Mitchel evades also this aspect of the question of responsibility.

Some of O’Flaherty’s peasant characters, too, express a deeply felt sense of social injustice. Patch Hernon, “half-demented” though he is, has a clear focus for his resentment, which arises out of a conviction that he is a victim of injustice because of his low social status and his poverty. “I’ll get my rights yet”, he declares; “[t]he day’ll come when the poor man’ll come into his own. The landlords and the grabbers that are living on the people’s backs will be laid low” (82). The underlying philosophy of an eye for an eye, which echoes Johnny Hynes’s ambition to have “satisfaction”, is perhaps more acceptable in Patch Hernon since he, as a subsistence farmer with a large family to provide for, has never had a realistic chance to better himself. For this he blames landlords and gombeen men, rightly or not, and seeing them “laid low” would satisfy his claim for justice. Judith Shklar has suggested that “[p]robably nothing can assuage the sense of injustice as well as revenge”, and that “the spontaneous reaction to injustice is ... a call for ... revenge. A sense of injustice not only makes us boil quietly, it also moves us to get even, for it does nothing to make us more rational.”⁶⁴ The thought of future revenge, irrational though it may seem, is what keeps Patch going for the time being. But in a society characterized by radical economic and social chasms, people like him are unlikely ever to get their “rights.” “Inequalities”, writes Shklar, “create the field in which the betrayal of hope and the sense of injustice flourish.”⁶⁵ When Sally O’Hanlon’s husband, Patsy, is laid off from the public works, she keenly feels the injustice of the social disadvantages deriving from poverty:

Is it mad the world has got, to let the poor die of hunger while there’s so much riches? ... How can God above hold back his thunder when such things are happening? Didn’t Christ die for us all? He didn’t die for the rich alone.

As Sally sees it, the rich never have to suffer the kind of injustice that Patsy and his fellow workers have been subjected to on the relief works:

⁶⁴ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, pp. 84, 91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

Patsy has wages coming to him, whenever he gets it. The little they pay is not regular they pay it. The rich are paid on the nail and it's jail for those who don't pay them, but the poor are left to whistle for their mite.

Sally's sense of injustice is deepened by a barely conscious feeling that the poor are perceived as a burden by the more fortunate: "Ah! The poor!" she muses, "why did God ever pester the world with them" (340)?

To most of the inhabitants of Black Valley, questioning God's purpose or, even worse, His will, is unthinkable. Brian Kilmartin, encouraged by the promising-looking potato plants in the early summer of 1846, declares that "God sends famine to remind us of our sins, but He sends plenty to show His goodness. There's riches in the earth for them that has patience with it" (273-74). His optimism proves premature as, a few months later, the blight strikes for the second time, destroying the whole crop in one blow. Instead of the reward of God's plenty, Brian's patience with the earth earns him nothing but a few fields of rotten potato stalks. Defeated, he can see no other reason for the calamity than "the hand of God" nor offer any comment besides "God's will be done" (304). His wife, Maggie, and Mary's mother, Ellen, also resign themselves to the apparent will of God. Maggie has "lost the desire to go on living" (272), and when Brian quarrels with Sally and Mary about whether or not leaving Black Valley is an option, her reaction reveals that she has all but given up hope:

"Lord save us!", Maggie moaned in the hearth corner. "If we are to die of hunger, couldn't we all die in peace and quietness without shouting and making God angry? Now is the time for us to save our souls with prayer." (342)

Contemporary accounts as well as folklore strongly suggest that Brian's interpretation of the cause of the Famine was widely accepted among the peasantry. When considered in the context of their religion, the explanation for the *blight* that these people have is perhaps rational enough: it is a punishment from God. Unfortunately, such an explanation can – and in the case of some of O'Flaherty's characters, does – lead to a fatalism which contributes to the gradual destruction of their will to fight for survival. Moreover, it excludes the possibility, alluded to by so many contemporary observers, that prolonged *famine* following crop failure is attributable to human agency rather than to God. Unlike the older members of the Kilmartin household, Mary does not accept the notion of divine intervention, one way or the other. As the rest of the household give in to "the strange helplessness of defeat", she reproaches them angrily: "Get up and stir yerselves, all of ye [...] ... We won't get anything sitting here on our

backsides praying to God. God helps them that help themselves” (310-11). But as their situation becomes increasingly desperate, Mary finally loses her trust in God’s help:

For the first time she rebelled against her belief in Divine Providence. There was no God for her or the other poor people, who were starving to death. God belonged to the rich, among whom there was no hunger and no understanding of hunger. To be afflicted with hunger was considered, in the world of the rich, a crime which placed the sufferers outside the bounds of humanity. They were to be pursued by the servants of the rich, thrown into jail, or bayoneted, or hanged. (420-21)

Like Sally, she perceives the inequalities between rich and poor as unjust, and her resentment of the rich is intensified by the feeling that they are favoured by God while the poor have been abandoned by both.

The predatory landlord, an often prominent figure in nationalist history, is conspicuously absent from *Famine*. The Thompsons are absentees who seem to have forgotten all about their Irish estate, which they do not even visit any longer. For the past thirty years, the Crom estate has been the charge of agents who have as little interest in it as the proprietor. Crom House, in which the Thompsons used to live “in considerable style” up until the time of the Union, is now “practically a ruin”, sitting in what looks like “an ill-kept meadow” (67-68). Mortgaged to the full, endlessly sub-divided, and returning only half of its potential yield, the estate is the quintessence of mismanagement and neglect. The owner of such an estate would have been subject to severe criticism by Mitchel as well as many other nationalist writers. O’Flaherty, on the other hand, recounts events and circumstances which have led to this state of decline without explicitly commenting on landlord responsibility, leaving it to the readers to decide how much blame, if any, attaches to Mark Thompson for the miserable situation of his tenantry. Thompson does not come across as predatory, but he could certainly be accused of neglect and blamed for unleashing a rapacious exploiter on the inhabitants of Black Valley and Glenaree. Chadwick, the landlord’s agent, is described as “generally too drunk to take any active part in looking after the estate, except to receive the rents” (56). A former captain in a British regiment stationed in India, he has somehow disgraced his father’s name and lost his property in England. Thompson has given him the agency in Crom “out of pity”, and now he finds himself isolated there “among a lot of howling savages.” Chadwick himself admits that he has become an habitual drunkard, but he blames Ireland rather than himself for his personal decline:

I'm a wreck at forty-five. This is the devil of a life. I've changed out of all recognition since I came here five years ago. Now I can't go. There's nowhere else to go[.] ... What has it done to me? ... I've just become a sot. This is no place for an Englishman. (70-71)

His contempt for the native Irish, and especially the peasants, is profound. They are "lazy wretches" who "live entirely on the potato" and, therefore, must suffer recurring famines. They are "ruffians of the worst kind, multiplying like rabbits", and there are "three millions more than enough of them in the country" (74-75). In characterizing the Irish peasants as a "surplus" population of indolent barbarians, he echoes the views held by many Englishmen at the time.

As Chadwick sees it, the small landholders and cottiers are parasites who expect to be "pampered on the landowners' and the ratepayers' money" (227) and, as if that was not bad enough, use the potato blight as an excuse not to pay rent. This he will not tolerate, and when the tenants fail to meet the demand for rent because they simply have nothing to pay it with, he proceeds to enforce the law. The resident magistrate's efforts to dissuade him from confiscating livestock and evicting rent defaulters are useless since Chadwick has no scruples regarding his planned course of action. "I'm just a servant of the proprietor", he asserts, "[m]y business is just to collect the rents and evict them [the tenants] if they don't pay" (74). Mr. Coburn, too, tries to plead for the tenants, but he is fobbed off with the retort that "Major Thompson does not maintain this estate as a charitable institution", and Coburn's argument that "a landowner has his duties as well as his rights" (234) falls on deaf ears. It does not occur to Chadwick that he may be doing Thompson and, by extension, himself a disservice by threatening the tenants with confiscation and eviction. James Donnelly has noted that "especially [in] Connaught, landlords who persisted in hunting down their rents found that large numbers of their tenants sold their crops and stock surreptitiously and simply ran away."⁶⁶ Consequently, these landlords were deprived not only of payments for arrears, but also of any further income from the abandoned farms until they could be re-let or turned into grazing land. Chadwick's bailiff, Hegarty, points out to him that absconding is already a recurring phenomenon among the Thompson tenants:

The people say they'll pay nothing. Twenty families are gone to America now off the estate, taking every living thing they had. They were certain payers, too. I doubt if we'll collect anything, sir, out of Black Valley or Glenaree except by force. (234)

⁶⁶ James S. Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 103.

Hegarty is implying that showing a bit of lenience might be a more fruitful way of handling the situation, but Chadwick is determined to enforce the law. "I'll let them have it", he declares, "I'll round up every cat, rat and louse on the estate. I'll show those beggars what I can do [...] ... It's war to the knife, as far as I'm concerned, between me and these ruffians. If I had the power I'd shoot them like dogs" (234-35).

Although Chadwick maintains that he is looking after Mark Thompson's interests, his brutality reveals that what really motivates him is his hatred of the peasants. This becomes apparent in the scene where the livestock of the Black Valley tenants is confiscated to compensate for unpaid rents. In a desperate effort to retain some means of survival, some of the tenants have taken their sheep and goats up into the mountains, out of reach of the agent and his bailiff. When Chadwick and Hegarty arrive, they are told that the animals are "lost on the mountain." Chadwick is infuriated by this attempt at deception. "I'll teach them to hide their animals", he shouts, "I'll teach them to come to my house and try to murder me" (262). Under the threat of eviction, a tenant named Halloran brings his sheep down from the mountain and turns them over to Hegarty. Driven by his thirst for revenge, Chadwick nevertheless evicts the Hallorans and has his "rowdies with crowbars" (260) destroy their cabin, thus forcing the family of seven to take to the road. Kate Hernon, the village "wise woman", also becomes a victim of Chadwick's vindictiveness. She has no land, and the rent for her cabin has never been collected because she is "a witch of a woman" (263). The fact that she owes rent is reason enough for Chadwick to evict her and destroy the miserable dwelling she has been living in. As a result of the eviction, Kate goes mad and ends up in the asylum. As for the Kilmartins, they have had time to sell their lambs before Chadwick arrives at their cabin, but their only cow is confiscated. The fact that they have been solvent tenants so far makes no difference to him. Chadwick's hatred is reciprocated by those he persecutes, and although they fear him, they are not always able to hide their hostility. Halloran calls down the curse of God on him, and Kate Hernon declares that he has "the curse of Cromwell" written on his forehead (264). Brian Kilmartin's "subservient expression" changes to one of "savage defiance" (265) when he realizes that Chadwick has come to take the cow from him. And yet there is nothing that any of them can do to stop him. "God's will be done", utters a resigned Halloran, unwittingly drawing a parallel between Chadwick and the potato blight, both equally inescapable and relentless.

Just like Hynes the gombeen man, characters like Chadwick are historically authentic. In his study of Famine folklore, Roger McHugh notes that anecdotes

about evicting landlords are counterbalanced by stories about avaricious and callous agents:

[W]here landlords are sometimes praised or are thought culpable mainly because they left everything to their agents, these are remembered almost invariably as having been merciless and hard, grinding for arrears of rent, evicting, levying fines for improvements or without cause.⁶⁷

Contemporary accounts confirm that ruthless agents were by no means uncommon. Reporting to the *Times* on the state of Ireland in 1845-46, Thomas Campbell Foster noted that

the agents ... conceive they have but one duty to perform – to get as much rent as they can for their principals. Every motive of self-interest compels them to this, for according to the *quantum* of rent is the *quantum* of commission they receive.⁶⁸

William Smith, the officer in charge of the public works in a County Roscommon district, claimed that the agent of an absentee landlord “is often guilty of a harshness that he would be ashamed to exert were the estate his own”⁶⁹, and the American traveller William Balch wrote of these agents:

I have had the most undoubted proofs of the most wicked and inhuman treatment of these task-masters, in numberless instances; and there are not wanting evidence of their treachery to the landlords themselves.⁷⁰

Chadwick is proof of all these assessments. Moreover, his drinking, gambling and aspirations to stylish living land him with endless debts, in spite of his liberal salary. Under such circumstances, dishonesty to the landlord is more than likely, although it does not become evident until Chadwick is about to leave Crom with the money raised on the sale of the confiscated livestock of the tenants. The man who sees the peasants as parasites is thus shown to be one himself.

A representative of colonial landlordism, Chadwick exerts a power over the peasants which they perceive as social injustice – the rich oppressing the poor. As such, he is a character that would perhaps merit the name of villain, particularly since the fact that the people he is exploiting are facing starvation and this does not kindle one spark of sympathy in him. His sexual dysfunc-

⁶⁷ Roger McHugh, “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 391-436 [429].

⁶⁸ Thomas Campbell Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846), p.33.

⁶⁹ Smith, *A Twelve Months’ Residence in Ireland during the Famine and the Public Works*, p. 110.

⁷⁰ Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It*, p. 229.

tion (eventually revealed to be impotence as a result of castration), manifest in his general debauchery, his perverted relationship with Ellie Gleeson, and the attempted assault on Mary, shows him in an even more odious light. And yet he cannot simply be dismissed as a “stereotyped villain out of melodrama”, as Paul Doyle would have it.⁷¹ On the contrary, I would argue that Chadwick is one of the most interesting characters in the novel. Margaret Kelleher is surely right in suggesting that “O’Flaherty signals the degenerate nature of English rule through Chadwick’s impotence”,⁷² but that is not all he does with this character. As I see it, he uses Chadwick also to demonstrate the adverse effects of colonialism not just on the colonized, but also on the colonizer himself. Chadwick’s story is one of brutality breeding hatred which leads to more brutality in a vicious circle of violence and retaliation. His erratic behaviour finds expression in sudden changes from a semblance of good humour to fits of blind rage, from aggressive defiance and threats to whimpering fear and self-pity. Reilly, his groom, and Ellie both attribute this to madness induced by alcohol, and so does Dr. Hynes, who declares that “a man like that should be put into the mad-house” (129). As Paul Marchbanks has suggested, the intoxicated Chadwick “actually enters a state approximating clinical insanity”⁷³ which, for the doctor, confirms the connection between alcoholism and madness. But when Ellie tells her sister about what is going on at Crom House, it becomes clear that alcoholism is not the only source of Chadwick’s turbulent behaviour:

[H]e sometimes wakes up at night with the horrors from drinking too much. Then he shouts and he sees things, something he did when he was with the soldiers in India. I do be terrified out of my life, the things he orders me to do, strip off all my clothes and get into bed with him and then he not laying a hand on me, only clutching me like I was his mother and he pretending to be a baby at breast. Then I have to sing to him, same as to a baby[,]... and he babbles there in a way to put the heart crosswise in me, thinking he is mad. For mad he is when he has the drink taken. (91)

Apparently, Chadwick’s “madness” originates in what happened when he was serving in India. Exactly what he “did” there is never spelled out, but the memory of it obviously haunts him. After a heavy drinking bout followed by an attempted suicide, he is “in mortal terror of something that troubled his mind” (126). If this “something” refers to some atrocity perpetrated on the natives, then this man does have a conscience even if it is suppressed to the point where

⁷¹ Doyle, *Liam O’Flaherty*, p. 98.

⁷² Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 138.

⁷³ Paul Marchbanks, “Lessons in Lunacy: Mental Illness in Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine*”, *New Hibernia Review*, vol, 10, no. 2 (2006), pp. 92-105 [97].

only the anxiety brought on by *delirium tremens* can reveal it. In his dealings with the peasants of Black Valley, there is no sign of it at all. Compassion is stifled by a mixture of hatred, fear and vindictiveness, all of which probably stem from the traumatic event in India which no one except Reilly knows anything about. After Chadwick's death, Reilly is forced to reveal what he knows in order to save Mary from being implicated in the murder of the agent. "The heathens got at him", he tells the district inspector, and they "cut off half his shame, saving your presence, he let it out one night when he was drunk" (291). The colonized "heathens" of India have had their revenge on the colonizer, and in keeping with the eye for an eye-philosophy, Chadwick is now seeking revenge in his turn. The fact that his retaliation in the form of harsh, unfeeling exploitation affects Irish rather than Indian people is of no consequence – one subject people serve the purpose just as well as another.

But in the end, this only goads the peasants into resistance, which then leads to more violence on both sides. And yet Chadwick's desire for revenge is no different from that of Gleeson or Patch Hernon in that it derives from a sense of personal injustice. As Reilly says of his dead master, "let there be an excuse, Lord have mercy on him, for any queerness. He had no right to take the people's stock, with the hard times, but he was driven to it, one way and another" (291). Unlike Reilly, O'Flaherty does not make excuses for Chadwick's behaviour, but he does acknowledge the possibility of responding empathetically to it. Regarding the difficulties involved in empathizing with perpetrators, Dominick La Capra writes:

[O]ne may justifiably resist empathy in the sense of feeling or understanding that may serve to validate or excuse certain acts. In fact, one may feel antipathy or hatred. But one may nonetheless argue that one should recognize and imaginatively apprehend that certain forms of behavior ... may be possible for oneself in certain circumstances, however much the events in question beggar the imagination.⁷⁴

Readers might of course perceive another obstacle to empathy in Chadwick's deviant sexual behaviour. But as La Capra also points out, "notions of normality and ordinary behavior" tend to "prejudge what normal or ordinary people – 'we'—are capable of doing and hence to stereotype and demonize so-called perversity."⁷⁵ In his review of the novel, Sean O'Faolain comments on what he sees as a lack of pity in the portrait of Chadwick. "Inhuman as his kind were",

⁷⁴ La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

he writes, “they remain human beings.”⁷⁶ *Pace* O’Faolain, I think this is exactly what O’Flaherty is trying to show. By offering glimpses into Chadwick’s past which serve to throw some light on his present behaviour, he creates a space for empathetic understanding, enabling readers to see the human being in all his frailty and imperfection behind the mask of the monster. Still, as Judith Shklar has argued, “common sense tells us that the unjust are not the real victims of their misdeeds”, and we should not forget that, however miserable they are, “the victim is surely worse off.”⁷⁷ O’Flaherty does not forget this, nor does he let his readers do so. As in the case of Hynes, it is difficult to condone a course of action which so obviously serves to increase the suffering of the starving people.

2.3. Representing the victims

In their attempts to describe the effects of famine on its victims, contemporary observers often tended to emphasize the physical manifestations of starvation and disease. Their accounts repeatedly made use of living skeletons, spectres and walking ghosts as metaphors for the “appalling spectacle” of people starving and dying on a frightful scale. At Strokestown, County Roscommon, Alexander Somerville found the people “going about ... with hollow cheeks and glazed eyes, as if they had risen out of their coffins.” At Longford, he encountered a family who were “skeletons all of them, with skin on the bones and life within the skin.”⁷⁸ In the early part of 1847, a resident of Castlebar, County Mayo, found “a cabin with fourteen skeletons of human beings ... without a morsel of food”, and William Forster of the Society of Friends reported on the “walking skeletons” he saw in a Connemara village.⁷⁹ The American pacifist and philanthropist Elihu Burritt visited Skibbereen in the same year and was appalled by the sight of starving children. In one cabin, he found

three breathing skeletons ... *entirely naked*. And these human beings were alive! If they had been dead, they could not have been such frightful spectacles ... especially when one of them clung to the door ... it assumed an appearance, which can have been seldom paralleled this side of the grave. [original emphasis]⁸⁰

⁷⁶ O’Faolain, *Review of Famine*, p. 82.

⁷⁷ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, p. 31.

⁷⁸ Somerville, *Letters from Ireland*, pp. 87, 96.

⁷⁹ Ivor Hamrock, *The Famine in Mayo* (Castlebar: Mayo County Council, 2004), p. 20; *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Elihu Burritt, *A Journal of a Visit of Three Days to Skibbereen and its Neighbourhood* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), p. 14.

Similarly, Joseph Crosfield of the Society of Friends noted that some of the children at Carrick-on-Shannon in County Roscommon were “worn to skeletons, their features sharpened with hunger, and their limbs wasted almost to the bone.” His companion, William Forster, added that the faces of these children were “wan and haggard with hunger, and seeming like old men and women.” William Bennett described starving children in Belmullet, County Mayo, as “ghastly” and “perfectly emaciated” and adults who had been so ravaged by hunger and disease that they were “scarcely human in appearance.”⁸¹

Images like these were eventually incorporated into subsequent Famine narratives, fictional as well as historical. Mitchel’s cowering wretches, fleshless limbs and bloated faces exemplify the growing tendency to recycle established metaphors. In many historical texts published after *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, they are used to epitomize the suffering experienced by thousands. For instance, A.M. Sullivan inscribes victims in the “horrible phantasmagora” of “gaunt, cadaverous creatures” swarming over his native district, and his brother Timothy writes about the “living skeletons” tottering about in Skibbereen.⁸² Other writers engage with the victims only by proxy. In his book *The Parnell Movement* (1886), T.P. O’Connor quotes Canon O’Rourke, A.M. Sullivan and the “Tables of Death” from the Census for Ireland of 1851. Most of these quotes contain already familiar images of suffering, and the dead are represented by numbers only. Michael Davitt recycles Mitchel’s description of famine and its victims published in the first issue of the *United Irishman* in February 1848. The piece, which in Davitt’s opinion “fascinates the reader with its magic realism of picture and expression”, features children with “cramped and weazened” faces and gangs of “ghostly” men toiling on the public works.⁸³ P.S. O’Hegarty, too, contents himself with quoting Mitchel and chooses the passages from *The Last Conquest of Ireland* and the *Nation* which I discussed earlier in this chapter. Like Mitchel, both Davitt and O’Hegarty devote most of their analyses to the politics of the Famine years. In James Connolly’s *Labour in Irish History*, references to victims are even scantier. Connolly tells the story of two hundred passengers suffocated below decks on an emigrant ship in 1848 and cites the estimated number of deaths in 1847 and 1848. The rest of the chapters relating to the Famine concentrate on economic and political aspects. There is, then, a clear tendency in Irish historical writing between 1860 and 1952 to stereotype

⁸¹ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, pp. 146, 163.

⁸² A.M. Sullivan, *New Ireland*, pp. 125, 130; T.D. Sullivan, *Recollections of Troubled Times in Irish Politics* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1905), p. 5.

⁸³ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, p. 57.

the Famine victims as a more or less dehumanized, yet pitiable, anonymous mass.⁸⁴

Images of the physical effects of famine on victims abound also in novels written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Margaret Kelleher has noted that “many of the narratives written by women contain graphic, often harrowing descriptions” of the sufferers.⁸⁵ Male novelists were no less prone to describing the horrors of famine, and the metaphors used by contemporary observers recur also in their texts. For instance, Herbert Fitzgerald, the hero of Anthony Trollope’s *Castle Richmond*, encounters a “corpse-like woman” and the “life-like corpse” of her child.⁸⁶ In Canon Sheehan’s *Glenanaar*, one finds “gaunt spectres”, ghosts walking the land, and “giant figures, reduced to skeletons by hunger.”⁸⁷ William Carleton describes the countryside as “one vast lazar-house” filled with “cadaverous and emaciated” human beings who “looked like creatures changed from their very humanity”, and the cowering wretches prowling in turnip fields of *The Last Conquest of Ireland* are appropriated, word for word, by Louis J. Walsh in his novel *The Next Time*.⁸⁸ Although these novels do individualize the suffering in various degrees, the function of spectacle remains strong in a number of them. Configured as broken-down bodies, victims are denied in-depth representation: they have, in the words of Margaret Scanlan, “no psychological conflicts, no history, no culture.”⁸⁹ And rather than engaging with the victims’ struggle to survive, these novels tend to foreground passive suffering.

Established images of famine appear in Liam O’Flaherty’s novel, too, but they do not proliferate, nor do they serve merely as spectacles of universal suffering brought on by prolonged famine. Rather, O’Flaherty re-inscribes them as the “fearful realities” that many contemporary observers undoubtedly intended them to represent. By making them part of the overall famine experience of his main characters, he counterbalances the impression of voyeuristic spectacle which threatens to invade a number of earlier representations. The “specta-

⁸⁴ Canon O’Rourke’s *The History of the Great Irish Famine* is a notable exception, see for example pp. 145-49 and 151-53.

⁸⁵ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ Anthony Trollope, *Castle Richmond* [1860] (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), p. 333.

⁸⁷ Patrick Sheehan, *Glenanaar* [1905] (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 1989), p. 198.

⁸⁸ William Carleton, *The Black Prophet* [1847] (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), pp. 186, 221; Louis J. Walsh, *The next Time: A Story of ‘Forty-Eight* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1919), p. 155.

⁸⁹ Margaret Scanlan, “The Limits of Empathy: Trollope’s *Castle Richmond*”, in George Cusack and Sarah Goss (eds), *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon* (Dublin and Portland, OR.: Irish Academic Press, 2006), pp. 66-76 [67].

cle of hungry and despairing people” wandering into the village of Crom unnerves Dr. Hynes, not because it is terrible to see, but because it makes him “feel ashamed of not being able to help” (135). On his way westward in search of Martin, Thomsy encounters dead people in a cabin as well as on the road and hears stories about people eating dogs and cats, and even each other. Having returned to Black Valley, he recounts these horrors to his family in a matter-of-fact way. The only thing that seems to disturb him in all of it is that the man he told about the three young people he found dead in their cabin did not even bother to “put the sign of the cross on himself.” The reason for such deplorable behaviour, he explains, is that “[t]hey are used to dead people in that far country.” Thomsy himself seems to have become used to death, however gruesome. “I saw two more dead people on the road”, he remarks. “One of them had his face half eaten off him, but that’s neither here nor there” (381). Concern for the living takes precedence over lamentations for the dead as Thomsy goes on to relate what little he has learned of Martin’s whereabouts.

But the awful reality of what Thomsy has seen is soon brought home to the Kilmartins when he dies of typhus fever and is found on the mountain by Brian, Maggie and Ellen. There is no graphic description of Thomsy’s mutilated corpse, no sense of horrid spectacle, only Maggie’s mumbled response to Mary’s anxious query: “The dogs were at him ... They tore off his head” (422). At this point, Maggie is already considerably weakened in body as well as in spirit. In the space of one year, she has suffered multiple personal losses: one of her sons has died of consumption, her two daughters have been forced to emigrate, and the fate of her remaining son, on the run from the authorities, is uncertain. Emotional stress combined with undernourishment have enfeebled her to such an extent that, after the seizure of the family’s remaining stock, she takes to her bed and succumbs to “idiocy.” As a result, Thomsy’s rather confused tale of his search for Martin only convinces her that her son “is gone from me like the rest of them”, and she falls into the “stupor of indifference” which, slowly but surely, has been overtaking her (388). Finally, the loss of her brother Thomsy and the sight of his disfigured body nearly push her over the edge and she starts “wandering in her head”, as her husband puts it (429). Thus before she dies, Maggie seems to be on the verge of madness.

In her essay “Famine Roads and Famine Memories”, Emily Lawless reflected on whether it was at all possible to live through the Famine without going mad:

The mere bald enumeration of the number of lives extinguished in this one county of Galway during those two years of famine is enough to make one ask oneself how any man or woman living there at the time retained his or

her sanity. Many did not. The list of those, well above the reach of actual hunger, who broke down, mind and body alike, from pity, from a sense of unutterable horror, is greater than would be believed, or than has ever been set down in print.⁹⁰

But was she right in claiming that famine precipitated insanity, and not only among those who were not actually starving? Although contemporary observers tended to circumvent the subject, there are accounts which seem to validate Lawless' conclusion. For instance, in January 1846, a report from Swinford, County Mayo, stated that "[t]he enormous price and demand for meal ... has driven thousands into actual madness", and one year later, the *Cork Examiner* wrote about "women turned into maniacs by hunger, and, in their new-born ferocity, turning savagely on their own flesh and blood."⁹¹ In December that same year, a boy in Leap, County Cork, slit the throats of two children who were trying to prevent him from stealing some Indian meal. Dr Daniel Donovan diagnosed the case as "mental imbecility caused by starvation." The doctor also reported that there were "cases of people deranged by hunger attempting suicide."⁹² Asenath Nicholson took charge of a Dublin woman in "a state of half idiocy" and saw to it that she was fed for a period of two years, and yet "her mind never rallied." While visiting Belmullet, County Mayo, in the autumn of 1847, Nicholson wrote to a friend about the state of the peasantry there: "Hunger and idleness have left them a prey to every immorality[.] ... Many are now maniacs, some desperate, and some idiots."⁹³

Statistics reveal a dramatic increase in admissions to lunatic asylums in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Mark Finnane notes that "during a half-century of population decline the admission rate had grown more than four-fold." and that those admitted were "predominantly from the peasantry and working class."⁹⁴ Finnane's figures elucidate the extent of mental illness only partly since, during this period, the mentally ill were also confined in the lunatic wards of the workhouses. According to Joseph Robins, the asylums held about 17,000 inmates in 1901, while

⁹⁰ Emily Lawless, *Traits and Confidences* [1897] (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1979), pp. 154-55.

⁹¹ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 110; *Cork Examiner*, 6 January, 1847.

⁹² Quoted in Patrick Hickey, *Famine in West Cork* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 2002), p. 286.

⁹³ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, pp. 45, 101.

⁹⁴ Mark Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane in Post-Famine Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 130, 131; see also Table 2, p. 131.

the total insane population then in institutions or at large was calculated at over 25,000[.] ... Fifty years earlier the number of known insane was less than 10,000. Now with a smaller population the number was two-and-a-half times more.⁹⁵

Robins also notes that the incidence of mental illness showed no signs of abating in the twentieth century as “between 1963 and 1978 the hospitalisation rate in Ireland remained about two and a half times the figure for English mental hospitals.” In conclusion, he remarks that one can only “speculate why the past has left such an unwelcome heritage.”⁹⁶ But neither Robins nor Finnane consider to what extent the Famine may have contributed directly to increasing mental illness. In her essay on the Connaught District Lunatic Asylum, Oonagh Walsh finds that admissions to the institution rose sharply once the famine hit. In 1847, she writes, “113 patients were admitted, an increase of 53 per cent on the previous year.” She suggests two possible explanations for this, one being that families who had cared for mentally ill members in their homes were no longer able to do so, and the other that the famine forced “the so-called ‘lunatics at large’, the generally harmless wandering population” into the asylum. Both of these explanations presuppose mental illness acquired *before* the Famine and, like Finnane and Robins, Walsh disregards the potential cause-and-effect relationship between famine and madness. And yet she refers to what, in the nineteenth century, was seen as “moral reasons” for insanity which included “grief, fear, anxiety ... poverty or reverse of fortune”, in short, “stress related illness in one form or other.”⁹⁷ Such stress factors, intensified by famine conditions, would very likely have taken a heavy mental toll on a physically weakened population struggling to survive, and Liam O’Flaherty, for one, certainly seemed to think so.

Many of the characters in *Famine* either end up hovering on the brink of insanity or succumbing to it. Patch Hernon is an example of the latter. When first introduced, he is already on the verge, described as having “the appearance of a demented fellow”, his hands and nostrils twitching, his head jerking from side to side, and his face wearing “a perpetual, maniacal grin” (48-49). He suffers from “the mania of persecution” and, owing to his wanderings in the desolate mountain area above Black Valley herding sheep, he is inclined to morbidity.

⁹⁵ Joseph Robins, *Fools and Mad: A History of the Insane in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1986), p. 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-01.

⁹⁷ Oonagh Walsh, “‘A Lightness of Mind’: Gender and Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland”, in Margaret Kelleher and James Murphy (eds), *Gender Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997), pp. 159-67 [163, 161-62].

Living in perpetual poverty and marked by endemic hunger, he and his large family are particularly vulnerable to the effects of famine. Having lost his only cow, and owning no pigs, Patch is unable to pay rent. Although his father-in-law, Brian Kilmartin, pays part of his arrears on rent day, he still owes Chadwick over eight pounds. Threatened with eviction and impending starvation due to the loss of his potato crop to the blight, the spectre of beggary goads him to attempt suicide. Consequently, he is estranged from family and neighbours who become afraid of him as they recognize the signs of madness: "The people of the hamlet ... saw Hernon's eyes and knew that he had seen the eye of the Evil One. For it was thus that they construed insanity" (139). His "mania of persecution" culminates when he encounters a noticeably intoxicated Dr. Hynes leaving Crom House of an early morning. Convinced that Chadwick and the gentry "are drinking the share of money I gave them on rent day", he slaughters one of his sheep and brings it home for his family to feast on. He is determined not to let what he has left in the world be taken by his perceived enemies. "When they send their bailiffs and their Peelers", he vows, "it's little they'll find that I won't have eaten." Going about the village "like a prophet of evil", he exhorts the people to follow his example (144). Chadwick, having heard about Patch's "ravings", sends his bailiff, Hegarty, to seize the remaining animals. This finally drives Patch over the edge and, like a mad Sweeney, he runs "naked all the way into the village, armed with a reaping hook, to kill Hegarty" (145).

The psychological stress of Patch's struggle with poverty arising from social and economic inequality is clearly indicated as a major factor contributing to his gradual descent into madness. It is hardly surprising, then, that the prospect of destitution and starvation generated by the onset of famine should unhinge his already disturbed mind. His desperate attempt to avert catastrophe by defying the system proves futile: he is certified as insane and committed to the asylum, and his wife and seven children, with no one to provide for them, are doomed to beggary – the very condition so much feared by Patch. In her effort to save the rest of the family, Kitty Hernon is driven to desperate measures. She sends two of her children off to America with her younger sister but feels the loss of them keenly:

I do reach out for them all of a sudden, twenty times a day, maybe, and at night as well, I do hear their voices calling me, like they were fallen in the fire. It's the ache in my heart that does it and I longing for the little creatures. God gave them to me but hunger took them away. (213)

In spite of her sacrifice, Kitty is unable to improve the situation of her remaining brood. She is refused employment on the public works since it presumably

is “against the regulations to employ women” (209).⁹⁸ Even the dreaded work-house, the very last alternative for possible survival, is beyond her reach since it is already full. Being destitute, her only other resource is the charity of her neighbours, but as the effects of famine slowly pauperize everyone, the poor are no longer able to help each other.

In one last desperate effort to save her children from wasting away before her eyes, Kitty appeals to the Protestant parson and his wife, asking them to take in her two youngest. The fact that they will be brought up as Protestants and that this will “damn their souls” does not deter her. “Where could a poor mother go?” she asks; “God is against us, so let the devil have his due[.] ... Let the sin be on me” (212). The parson knows better than to grant Kitty her wish, but he does help, giving her the money to buy passage to Liverpool. Famine drives Kitty to actions which, under normal circumstances, would be unthinkable and comparable to madness. Her subsequent behaviour suggests that she is no longer capable of being rational. Leaving Black Valley, “gaunt and wild-eyed ... with her ragged children within the folds of her gaunt arms”, she berates her fellow sufferers for not helping her and, “quite out of her senses”, falsely accuses the parson of persuading her to give up her children (215, 217). Thus as Kitty faces an uncertain future, she is already afflicted with the disturbed mind of the famine victim.

That even the strongest might be driven to the brink of insanity by famine is suggested by O’Flaherty in his portrait of Mary Kilmartin. When the blight first hits, Mary refuses to succumb to the “general apathy” which is becoming prevalent all around her. Rather than sitting around waiting for help from the government – which she is convinced will not be forthcoming – she is determined to prepare for the worst. For example, defying the prejudices of her father-in-law, Brian, she persuades her husband to clear a small patch of land behind their house for growing vegetables. But her efforts are often frustrated by the Kilmartins’ uncompromising allegiance to tradition and their failure to understand the need for economizing. Food is lavished on the terminally ill Michael, even when he obviously has no taste for it, and the family lives from hand to mouth. “Everything is given to Michael”, Mary tells her mother,

not that I begrudge him ... but they never think of the future. Every hen in the place will shortly be killed. The pound of butter that could be saved and sold for good money is spent on him. And I know it will do him no good, for death is written on his face. Then the potatoes are rotting on us and there’s nothing else[.] ... [A]lthough they have land, they have saved hardly

⁹⁸ Women and children were reluctantly allowed on the works from October 1846.

anything. There's no more than a few sovereigns in the house and what'll be got today for the pigs and the oats is owed already, to the landlord and the shop. (62)

She is also worried about her husband Martin's generosity, especially to his sister Kitty. As Mary sees it, charity begins at home, but Martin refuses to go against tradition. "While there is a bite in this house", he declares, "I'll see nobody go hungry, relation or neighbour or stranger or whatever it may be" (150). When consumption carries Michael off, tradition again demands a price which the Kilmartins can ill afford. But Brian is adamant that there must be a customary wake and funeral, with everything that these rituals entail, from candles to poitheen and tobacco. "I have always lived as the customs of the people say I should live", Brian retorts angrily when Martin cautions him about the cost, adding that "[t]here's no going against custom" (198-99). Although this funeral brings the Kilmartins very close to destitution, the procedure is repeated a few months later when Patrick Gleeson, Mary's brother, is killed in the attempt to murder Chadwick. With all this, and the confiscation of their last livestock, the family is left with nothing to fall back on when the blight strikes the second time.

In spite of the total failure of the potato crop, Mary holds on to her conviction that God helps them that help themselves, and that neither she nor her baby are going to die of starvation. In the effort to survive, she even resorts to stealing food, arguing that "a person has a right to take things to keep alive" (336). But the burden of having to provide for the whole family, her worries about Martin's safety, and the effects of perpetual hunger slowly wear her down. Anxiety and undernourishment alter her physical appearance as well as her behaviour:

The imminence of famine had wrought a marked change in her countenance[.] ... Her mouth had gathered together, somehow[.] ... Her eyes seemed to be searching for something. They were never still. They were fierce, on the alert, suspicious. Her hands, too, were shifty, and it was pitiful the way she now grabbed at her food, tore it greedily with her teeth and looked around in an uncouth fashion while she ate. (337)

The old people's inertia and their implicit expectation that she provide for them, force her towards the decision to escape. At first, the thought that she will be leaving them to their doom and failing in her duty to her mother makes her feel ashamed. But when Brian finds out about the plan and reproaches her for thinking of deserting them, she turns on him with savage cruelty: "You only think of yourself, and you with only a few years to live. We are young. We have

our lives before us" (387). Mary eventually reaches the point where she no longer cares what happens to the old people, and yet she hesitates to act on her decision to leave Black Valley. When typhus hits the village, at the same time that Thomsy returns from his failed mission to find Martin, she seems to lose her hope of survival: "There is nothing to do but to wait here for death", she cries (401). Finally, suffering from "nervous exhaustion", vacillating between despair and the hope of escape, between stupor and frantic activity, she is nearly pushed over the edge by Sally O'Hanlon's desperate act of infanticide.

Despite all the horrors she has to face and the fact that "her mind had begun to wander", Mary preserves her sanity by never quite relinquishing the hope of escape. Her neighbour and friend Sally is not so lucky. The O'Hanlon family is as ill-equipped to withstand famine conditions as can be. Evicted from their home in County Tipperary, they have settled as squatters in Black Valley, trying to exist on the yield of the "garden on half" given them by the Kilmartins and the occasional work Patsy is able to get. Endemic hunger has left its mark on all of them, especially the three children who "were all under-sized and emaciated. Their faces were unlike those of children. The queer, unholy wisdom begotten of hunger made them look old and unhappy" (39). The energetic Sally fights to keep starvation from the door, but when Patsy is laid off the public works, she begins to despair: "In her eyes was that dreadful famine look; the scared stare of an animal" (339). Her fighting spirit is temporarily restored by Mary's encouragement, but Patsy's death from famine dropsy causes renewed despondency, manifesting itself as the "stupor of indifference" to which Sally has so far been impervious. She spends the money that is collected for her after Patsy's death on "all manner of dainties" and puts aside the thought of leaving the village since, as she claims, "I have money now, so I won't go short." That Sally is suffering from mental trauma becomes clear when Mary finds her crouching on the ground near her hut:

She was staring fixedly towards the river, shading her eyes with her hand, as if she were watching something very interesting[.] ... She appeared to be having a conversation with some imaginary person, for she was making gestures and talking aloud. (376)

Mary's fear that Sally has "gone out of her mind" proves well founded. Rather than turning to the Quaker soup kitchen for help, Sally feeds her children boiled dog's meat. The ensuing sickness makes them howl with pain and, unable to bear watching their suffering, she smothers them. "I put the cloth over their heads", she explains to Mary; "[t]hey soon stopped crying after that. Now

they are as quiet as lambs” (413). Discovering that the children are dead, Mary is shocked and reduced to hysterical tears. But Sally has an explanation for what she has done which, to her, seems perfectly logical:

I had a right to put them out of their suffering ... and I'll bury them, too, when I have done my share of looking at their little faces. God gave them to me. I couldn't let them lie there screeching with the pain and nobody to help them. Is it with the meat of a dog I would go on filling their mouths and it only making them screech with the pain? (414)

Famine has made it impossible for Sally to feed her children, and the only way she can now “protect” them is to put them out of their misery. But to Mary, Sally's logic is perverse, and the desperate act can only be attributed to the unhinged mind of a “sick person.” As Margaret Kelleher has observed, “infanticide represents one of the most ‘unspeakable’ of horrors” in famine narratives.⁹⁹ In contemporary accounts of the Irish Famine, the subject is either avoided altogether or alluded to in the most oblique terms. For instance, reporting from Belmullet in May 1847, Richard Webb of the Society of Friends wrote:

I have heard instances of women wilfully neglecting their children, so that they died. Poor things! I can wonder at nothing I hear, after what I have seen of their fearful wretchedness and destitution. None of us can imagine what change would be wrought in ourselves if we had the same shocking experience.¹⁰⁰

Webb's comment is notable not only because it strongly suggests that infanticide *did* occur during the Famine, but because it focuses on the hardship and suffering which precipitated such a deed. Webb was of course aware that infanticide constituted a breach of secular as well as divine laws, and yet he refrains from passing judgment. O'Flaherty, on the other hand, confronts his readers with Sally's “unspeakable” act without circumlocutions. But just like Webb, he is disinclined to pass judgment on the poor wretch who feels driven to commit such an atrocity. What he does condemn, I would argue, is that Sally's logic can be appropriated by nationalist interests to boost outrage against the colonial power which, ostensibly, makes infanticide inevitable. Thus O'Flaherty's description of Sally's descent into madness, the murder of the children, and her justification of the deed, can be read as a critique of the way nationalist writers like Mitchel tended to exploit victims, especially women and children, in order to demonstrate the perceived evil consequences of colonial oppression.

⁹⁹ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 140.

¹⁰⁰ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 199.

And while Mitchel uses an image like that of insane mothers eating their dead children to epitomize the suffering of a subjugated nation in the process of being exterminated by the colonizer, O'Flaherty explores how abject poverty and perpetual hunger, what- or whoever the initial causes, affect the individual, and how the often futile struggle to survive and the hard choices that must be made in the course of that struggle lead to personal tragedies. As John Broderick has noted in his review of the novel, "[t]he effects of the famine turn these simple people into figures of tragedy; and some of them achieve it through an identification with the grotesque. Their privations reduce them to creatures almost, but not quite on the level of beasts of burden."¹⁰¹

In contrast to the passive victims of Mitchel's representation who do appear as something like beasts of burden, O'Flaherty's portrayal of Mary, Kitty and Sally foregrounds individuals who, to the very last, fight to avert starvation. In creating such characters, he challenges the impression conveyed not only by Mitchel, but also by the majority of contemporary observers and several nineteenth-century novelists such as Trollope, Margaret Brew and Elizabeth Walshe, that the predominant reaction to famine among the Irish poor was resignation and general apathy.¹⁰² Yet O'Flaherty does not deny that people succumbed to apathy, perhaps even too easily: already after the first failure of the potato crop, the poorest in Black Valley are described as "merely clinging to their homes in expectation of help from the government", sitting in their cabins "dazed and helpless" (112). Neither does he dismiss the notion that the people themselves were to some extent responsible for their miserable situation. But contrary to what Mitchel claimed, their plight has nothing much to do with cowardice and unwillingness to face up to "the tyrant." Rather, O'Flaherty suggests, it derives from their conservatism, their deep-rooted habits and stubborn inflexibility. Through the character of Brian Kilmartin, he explores how the indulgence of such traits reduces the chances of survival in a time of prolonged famine. Brian's suspicion of innovations frustrates Mary's attempts to augment the family's dwindling food supply by growing vegetables. Eventually, he is forced to give in, but refuses to take any part in the work of laying out the garden because it is "dangerous and revolutionary." He justifies his refusal by arguing that "[t]hey'll only raise the rent ... if they see any improvements made" (113). But as Mary intimates, the real reason is that he is afraid of what the neighbours will think

¹⁰¹ Broderick, "Roots", *Irish Times*, 19 January 1980, p. 13.

¹⁰² Margaret Brew, *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* [1885] 3 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979); Elizabeth Hely Walshe, *Golden Hills: A Tale of the Irish Famine* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1865).

and that he will become the laughing-stock of the village for allowing newfangled practices on his farm.

Brian's obstinate adherence to tradition proves disastrous when he insists on a proper wake and funeral for Michael. Although he has handed over the farm to Martin, the occasion of Michael's death again makes him "master in the house according to custom" (198), and Martin is forced to concur with his father's wishes even though he knows that the expense will bring the family to the brink of ruin. For Brian, at this point, the exigencies of tradition are much more pressing than the fear of imminent starvation. Even the famine-stricken people of the village attending the funeral are expected to uphold customary practices by contributing to the collection for the priest conducting the funeral mass. Fr Roche's refusal to allow any offerings is a source of great displeasure to Brian. "What are the times coming to", he grumbles, "[b]urying a man without offerings. It's not right" (203). By the time Mary's brother Patrick meets his end, the situation of the Kilmartin family has deteriorated further, but Brian is still adamant that custom must not be disregarded for the sake of economy. Up to this point, his traditionalism is represented as a rather negative trait, clearly linked to increasing hardship, but here, O'Flaherty suddenly intervenes with a comment in defence of it:

I must say that the old man was ... courageous. In spite of the desperate circumstances in which they found themselves, he insisted on the dead man being waked and buried according to custom. Mrs. Gleeson agreed with him and Mary was forced to submit[.] ... He maintained that to bury anybody without a proper wake was tantamount to sacrilege. (293)

Should Brian then be condemned for exacerbating an already precarious situation, or should he be commended for his resolute upholding of custom even under "desperate circumstances?" Again, O'Flaherty's reluctance to judge one way or the other comes to the fore, reflecting his ambivalent attitude to the peasantry.

In *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland*, O'Flaherty writes:

The tourist must pity and admire the peasants. He may also despise them, because any man that is deserving of pity is also deserving of contempt. But it is only an Irish peasant that can merit at one and the same time both contempt and admiration.¹⁰³

This dualistic perception of the peasant is evident also in O'Flaherty's representation of Brian's attachment to the land. When Mary first proposes that they

¹⁰³ O'Flaherty, *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland*, p. 67.

should leave Black Valley before they are left with nothing but “a roof over an empty hearth”, Brian is both terrified and indignant:

Leave the land, is it, at the first sign of trouble? Where else would you get land, or the riches that come out of it? It's foolishness and a temptation of the devil to dream of leaving it. Taking the good times with the bad, there's no more peaceful life on this earth. It's the life that God ordained, tilling the earth with the sweat of the brow. To be master of your own plot of ground and your own hearth. And making things grow, like a miracle, out of the cold earth. (257)

Mary has no such confidence in the land producing riches, and Brian's refusal to even contemplate departure puts another obstacle in the way of her efforts to save the family from ruin. When the promising crop of 1846 is destroyed overnight, Brian attributes the disaster to the will of God. From that time on until Mary's departure, he is torn between hope and despair, prone to frantic action one day and overcome by doubt and apathy the next. But his allegiance to the land never falters. When Mary again suggests that it might be better if they left the valley, he reproaches her angrily:

This morning you were full of fight and now you're talking of running away again. Fooh! Stand by the land. You married into this house and into this land. A son has been born to you in this house. And while the sod is there and this roof, the law of God is against you going. (341)

Brian's obstinacy in this matter not only weakens Mary's resolve to escape, but also seals his own fate. Since the land no longer yields the produce he needs for his sustenance, he is doomed to extinction. In view of such consequences, his attitude appears foolish and destructive in the extreme. Ultimately, he himself has to pay the highest price for it as his life-long struggle with nature ends in defeat.

For Brian, the famine spells not only starvation, disease and death, but also the imminent destruction of a way of life, the only way of life he knows. Continuing to work the land and to observe the rituals ordained by tradition is his strategy for dealing with the threat. Such a strategy, however, only serves as an unrealistic, temporary evasion of the inevitable. Seeing his potato garden turned into a putrid mass of blackened stalks, Brian is “stunned and unable to realize what had happened. Or else he did not want to understand it. He wished to hide the reality from himself” (308). And yet he seems to comprehend that this second onslaught of blight means the end of his world:

Not a sound broke the stillness of the evening. There were no birds. No youngsters rollicked at their evening play. All was still in a dead world[.] ...

What awful silence! ... All life had ceased. And with the fall of night, a dark shroud passed down from the heights into the valley's bed, as if returning this passing habitation of man to the womb of eternal death[.] ... He sat as still as the death around him, weeping on the mountain. (342-43)

Brian also realizes that he has no right to expect Mary to remain faithful to a way of life which is about to become extinct and that he must absolve her from her obligations to her elders, prescribed by tradition though they are. "You will have my blessing when you go", he finally tells her. "It's not into the grave with me that I'd want to be dragging either you or him [her baby]" (389). But Brian must remain where he is, because the only way he can preserve his dignity is by not betraying his values. In the end, circumstances nevertheless force him to forego tradition. When Mary's mother dies, Brian and Mary are obliged to bury her in "a common hole, in a wild field, like an animal" (430). And when Maggie dies shortly thereafter, Brian is unable to provide even a similar miserable resting place for her since the earth, by now frost-bound, which he has dedicated his whole life to cultivating refuses to yield to the few feeble attacks of his spade. In Mitchel's view, society is dissolved when "the system ... was found to work so fatally" that "hundreds of thousands of people were lying down and perishing in the midst of abundance and superabundance which their own hands had created."¹⁰⁴ O'Flaherty, on the other hand, suggests that society is dissolved when rituals and customs giving meaning to everyday life, however insignificant they may seem, can no longer be observed.

The scene describing Brian's death is one of the most affecting in this novel. As such, it would qualify for a place in any nationalist representation as an indictment of colonial oppression: the honest, God-fearing, hard-working small tenant farmer doomed to die because he is "surplus." But since O'Flaherty points out the faults and weaknesses of his character, it seems quite clear that he did not intend Brian to exemplify the nationalist martyr. "No doubt", he wrote in 1929, "all peasants in all countries are used by frantic writers to form ... the basis for a jingoistic patriotism."¹⁰⁵ Obviously, O'Flaherty did not count himself among those writers, and Brian might be seen as yet another corrective to the nationalist claim that the British government was solely responsible for the deadly effects of the Famine.

To return to the question of whether *Famine* can be characterized as a nationalist text in the spirit of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, I find that the answer must be negative. In its representation of history and politics as well as victims,

¹⁰⁴ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁵ O'Flaherty, *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland*, p. 69.

the former is in many ways a corrective to the latter. O'Flaherty does not see British rule as the root of all evil in Ireland, nor does he endorse the genocide thesis. While Mitchel urges rebellion at no matter what cost to the Irish people, and laments that it did not come to pass, O'Flaherty remains in two minds about such action, especially if attempted in the midst of famine and with no leadership to speak of. He would apparently like to believe in the power of spontaneous rebellion, but his characters gainsay that belief, and yet he does not condemn the people for failing to revolt like Mitchel tends to do. Both writers paint an unflattering picture of O'Connell, but where Mitchel blames him mainly for opposing Young Ireland on the question of armed resistance to British rule, O'Flaherty also draws attention to how that squabble overshadowed what should have been the main concern of the Irish leaders at the time, namely the securing of prompt and adequate relief.

The question of culpability is the one on which these two writers differ most. In contrast to *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, *Famine* does not represent the British government as exclusively responsible for the disaster. There is an unmistakable tension between the author's impulse to blame the government and his dramatization of the events. O'Flaherty sporadically compromises his objectivity by giving vent to his own opinions, which more often than not incriminate the government, but the actions and opinions of most of his characters clearly indicate that there are many issues besides the government's handling of the crisis that must be considered. In contrast to Mitchel, O'Flaherty opens up the question of responsibility to a discussion in which readers, too, can ultimately join. The novel as a whole conveys a sense of indeterminacy, suggesting that this issue is a complicated one which raises many more questions than can be answered by simply casting blame on the government. As such, it anticipates the revision of Famine history which was to emerge in the nineteen-fifties, and yet it eschews the apologetic tone characteristic of much revisionist historiography. But since O'Flaherty is not willing to reject the impression that the authorities could have done much more to mitigate the suffering of a starving people, his novel also looks forward to the post-revisionist phase of Famine history.

PART II

3. THE REVISIONIST TURN IN HISTORICAL WRITING

3.1. The ‘New Historians’ and the nationalist ‘myth’

The year 1936 marked the beginning of a new era in the field of Irish history-writing. Concerned about what they saw as a lack of professionalism within their discipline, T.W. Moody and R.D. Edwards initiated what was to be referred to as the historiographical revolution. The first step taken by these two young historians was the founding of The Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies in Belfast and The Irish Historical Society in Dublin. The main purpose of these societies was to promote new research, new methodologies and high academic standards. Two years later, Edwards and Moody launched their jointly edited journal *Irish Historical Studies* as the collective publication of the two societies. In the Preface to the first issue of the journal, the editors declared their intent:

We aim at doing, to the measure of our ability, what in England is distributed among several journals. We hope to be of service to the specialist, the teacher, and the general reader who has an intelligent interest in the subject. We have set before us two main tasks, the one constructive, the other instrumental. Under the first head are to be included articles, embodying the results of original research, and articles on reinterpretation and revaluation, in the light of new facts, of accepted views on particular topics. The latter type of article, under the title ‘Historical Revisions’, has been standardized in *History*, the journal of the Historical Association.¹

According to Dónal McCartney, this project would involve a re-evaluation of Irish history based on “research in the archives, the critical study of documents, the accumulation of as much data as possible, caution and qualification in the reaching of conclusions, the limiting of assertions to what was verifiable and a conscious attempt to eliminate all sectarian and political bias from the resulting historical narrative.”² But as the editorial statement of intent indicates, it would also involve “revisions”, and as Ciaran Brady has noted, it was made clear that the purpose of these revisions was to “refute received wisdom or unquestioned assumptions concerning well known events, persons or processes” and to “confront errors or misunderstandings directly ... both in the interests of academic probity and as a means of alerting teach-

¹ *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1938), pp. 1-3 [2-3].

² Dónal McCartney, “History Revisions – Good and Bad”, in Daltún Ó Ceallaigh (ed.), *Reconsiderations of Irish History and Culture* (Dublin: Léirmheas, 1994), pp. 134-56[140].

ers and general readers to the deficiencies inherent in the texts they had come to treat as authoritative.”³

In its most general sense of re-evaluating earlier versions of history, the concept of revisionism was neither new nor revolutionary. As Dónal McCartney has pointed out, “[t]he historian is constantly revising the narrative, the analysis, the interpretation of earlier historians in the light of new sources, new questions asked of old sources, new techniques, new approaches, new vantage points from which to view the past.”⁴ In the Irish context, however, revision also meant scrutinizing a version of history shaped by nationalist tradition and perceived as all but sacrosanct. As such, it was bound to raise controversy.⁵ The critic Terry Eagleton has observed that

[n]ationalist historiography was itself the first great revisionist school in Ireland, which took what were then the official imperial narratives of native history and rewrote them with breathtaking boldness from below, with all the courageous imagining, false continuism, historical truth, Manichean ethics, generous devotion to the dispossessed and triumphalist teleology which that involved.⁶

The result was a morally and ideologically charged “Story of Ireland”, replete with Irish heroes and, invariably, British villains; a story of a nation suffering under foreign rule and of its continuing struggle to cast off the oppressor. The immense and long-lived popularity of books like A.M. Sullivan’s *The Story of Ireland* suggests that the nationalist approach struck a responsive chord among the general readership in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But to Ireland’s “new historians” of the Edwards and Moody school, this kind of history was anathema. Thus from the late nineteen-thirties on, Irish history-writing was increasingly characterized by a distancing from the nationalist grand narrative, by an aspiration to be impartial and objective, to be judicious in drawing conclusions, to eschew political and sectarian prejudices and, as the historian F.S.L. Lyons put it, to “study the past for its own sake.”⁷

³ Brady, “Constructive and Instrumental”: The dilemma of Ireland’s First ‘New Historians”, pp. 4-5.

⁴ McCartney, “History Revisions – Good and Bad”, p. 134.

⁵ For an outline of the political, cultural and historical context of Irish revisionism, see Kevin Whelan, “The Revisionist Debate in Ireland”, *boundary 2*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2004), pp. 179-205 [180-94].

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop and other Essays on Irish Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 320.

⁷ F.S.L. Lyons, “The dilemma of the Irish contemporary historian”, *Hermathena*, CXV (1973), pp. 45-56 [52].

The question of objectivity in history-writing subsequently became an issue of contention between those who endorsed the revisionist model and those who opposed it. Lyons, according to Roy Foster “the most distinguished product of Theodore Moody’s history school”,⁸ represented the former. Although Lyons conceded that “no historian ... can be completely and thoroughly objective” because “we are not only all prisoners of our history, but also of our individual biographies”, he still stressed the obligation of the historian to strive for objectivity. His decided opinion was that the historian should “refrain from idle speculation; and, above all, if not ... abolish passion, at least ... subject it to reason[.] ... [H]is business is knowledge, not propaganda.” By promoting and adhering to such criteria, Lyons claimed, the historiographical revolution had resulted in “a professionalisation of the writing of history, leading ... to a much more rational and unhysterical approach to even the very recent past.”⁹ The opposing camp would base part of its counter-argument on the contention that the revisionist version of Irish history was as partisan as the nationalist version was held to be by its detractors and that its claim to objectivity was unsustainable because, particularly since the nineteen-seventies, revisionist historians had allowed current political concerns to influence their narratives. Thus Christine Kinealy criticized revisionists for having “a covert political agenda” since “[a]s republican violence intensified, so did the determination of revisionist historians to destroy nationalist interpretations of Irish history.”¹⁰ Seamus Deane, another critic of revisionist historians and their methods, argued that “their pseudo-scientific orthodoxy is ... tailored to match the prevailing political climate - especially in relation to the Northern crisis.” Deane also pointed out that historians “create the past in writing about it.” In doing so, “they are also writing in and of and for the present”, and this must necessarily impede their “capacity to be ‘objective.’”¹¹ Obviously, this would apply to nationalist historians as well. But the point that critics of revisionism have been trying to make is that, when allowing political and ideological ideals to colour their writings, revisionist historians make the same mistake as their nationalist colleagues. This places their claim to objectivity in a questionable light, and one mythology is simply

⁸ Foster, *The Irish Story*, p. 37.

⁹ Lyons, “The dilemma of the Irish contemporary historian”, pp. 49-50, 52-53.

¹⁰ Christine Kinealy, “Beyond Revisionism: Reassessing the Great Irish Famine”, *History Ireland*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1995), pp. 28-34 [34].

¹¹ Seamus Deane, “Wherever Green is Read”, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 234-45 [234, 242]. Deane’s critique of revisionist history is developed further in his *Strange Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 181-97.

replaced by another. As Wolfgang Mommsen has suggested, when historians write about the past

in order to influence the historical consciousness of their contemporaries ... [t]he objectivity that is required of [them] is not one of detached historicism, but rather one of a critical reflection on one's own position, while paying due respect to existing alternative positions and the values on which these are based.¹²

This, critics would claim, is something that revisionist historians have failed to recognize. Another anti-revisionist objection, particularly relevant to the case of the Famine, arose from the notion that a discourse aspiring to objectivity implied emotional detachment and an evasion of ethical questions and was, therefore, inadequate to the representation of a history replete with oppression, injustice and trauma. Such a discourse, it was claimed, would result in a desensitized and dehumanized history. Thus it was not the aim for objectivity *per se* so much as the means of attaining it to which anti-revisionists would eventually object most forcefully.

In the Irish context, the controversy surrounding the revisionist enterprise was further inflamed by the fact that revisionism involved a critical scrutiny of mythical elements which had allegedly distorted earlier history-writing. Moody believed that "Irish historians are called on to take an active part" in what he called "the mental war of liberation from the servitude to myth."¹³ For Lyons, the peremptory task of the new historians was the demythologizing of the past, a task which included the debunking of what they considered the "destructive myths" of nationalist history. In a lecture delivered in 1978, Lyons expressed his concern that Irish historians in their "entanglement with history" had locked themselves into "a hall of distorting mirrors so grotesque that we can no longer distinguish the realities of what has happened in this island from the myths we have chosen to weave about certain symbolic events." Although Lyons appeared to implicate also himself as a prisoner of historical myths by using the pronoun "we", he made it quite clear that he disapproved of myth being incorporated into history. The historian's task was not to perpetuate myth but to "use all the disciplines of his training to distance himself from [his] subject", to offer explanations, to be concerned only with the past, and to be "neither judge nor

¹² Wolfgang Mommsen, "Moral Commitment and Scholarly Detachment: The social function of the historian", in Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney (eds), *Historians and Social Values* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), pp. 45-55 [54].

¹³ T. W. Moody, "Irish History and Irish Mythology", in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 71-86 [86].

prophet.”¹⁴ The failure to recognize “the contrast between myth and history”, he asserted, had resulted in “the false history that has for too long masqueraded as the real thing.” He welcomed the fact that the historiographical revolution had created an atmosphere in which the old myths might be questioned and noted that this had led to “some fairly disenchanted criticism” of Patrick Pearse, for example, as well as to a re-evaluation of the Easter Rising of 1916 “in a colder, and ... more objective light.”¹⁵ Yet at the same time, Lyons was forced to admit that it had been slow in reaching the schools and that the process would be further slowed down “if different versions of Irish history continue to be taught in different schools.”¹⁶ This suggests that the traditional nationalist narrative had retained its hold on the popular imagination up through the late nineteen-seventies.

In his essay “Irish History and Irish Mythology” (1977), Theodore Moody argued that

it is not Irish history but Irish mythology that has been ruinous to us[.] ... History is a matter of facing the facts of the Irish past, however painful some of them may be; mythology is a way of refusing to face the historical facts. The study of history not only enlarges truth about our past, but opens the mind to the reception of ever new accessions of truth. On the other hand the obsession with myths ... perpetuates the closed mind.¹⁷

He introduced his argument by defining the role of the history of nations as the supplier of self-knowledge needed by societies “to preserve their corporate identity and their distinctive patterns of living.” However, as Moody went on to explain,

[n]ations derive their consciousness of their past not only ... from historians. They also derive it from popular traditions, transmitted orally, in writing, and through institutions. I am using the word myth to signify received views of this kind as contrasted with the knowledge that the historian seeks to extract by the application of scientific methods to his evidence. Myths as I define them contain elements of fact and fiction.¹⁸

By juxtaposing “received views” with “knowledge”, Moody establishes a clear dichotomy between popular and academic history. The former incorporates myth, which the latter is not allowed to do since myth is “faction” and, there-

¹⁴ F.S.L. Lyons, “The Burden of our History”, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 87-104 [88].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁷ Moody, “Irish History and Irish Mythology”, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

fore, not compatible with the empiricism and the objectivity aimed for by scientific history. Thus popular history is consigned to Lyons's category of "false history" and the story which, in Liam de Paor's phrase, "a society tells itself about itself in order to explain itself to itself —and to others" is written off as a fiction.¹⁹ In his effort to expose the falsity of what he refers to as "destructive myths", Moody assumes that the distinction between fact and fiction is always self-evident and unobscured, and that the two are mutually exclusive, while he also disregards the possibility of another, alternative truth emerging from an interpretation different from his own. Conor McCarthy has pointed out that

[t]here is no sense that myth might provide access to a 'truth' that 'facing the facts' could never reach[.] ... It does not seem to occur to Moody that 'history' or 'facts' or 'truth' might be discursively constituted, or that in the process of extracting the facts, the historian might be affected by subjective, textual, institutional, economic or political factors.²⁰

The rejection of myth as defined by Moody also suggests a discrediting of the ability of a society to make sense of its own past. As Luke Gibbons has argued, "[u]nderstanding a community or a culture does not consist solely in establishing 'neutral' facts and 'objective' details; it means taking seriously *their* ways of structuring experience, their popular narratives, the distinctive manner in which they frame the social and political realities which affect their lives" [original emphasis].²¹

Although Moody refers to "corporate identity" and the need for self-knowledge, he seems to disregard the symbolic role of myth in an historical consciousness through which that identity is developed and sustained. His chief quarrel is with the ideologically and politically coloured myths which have been incorporated into nationalist history for propaganda purposes. Obviously triggered by the turbulent situation in Northern Ireland in his own time, Moody's denunciation of, among others, the "predestinate nation" myth stems from the fact that it had been appropriated by the Provisional IRA in order to justify physical force as the means of achieving a free, united Ireland. When present political concerns are allowed into the evaluation of myth, the perspective is narrowed to a point where the culturally conditioned aspects of historical consciousness are pushed into the background. Nationalism then becomes

¹⁹ Quoted in Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 270.

²⁰ Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 87.

²¹ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 17.

nothing more than a form of politics deriving from a mythology which allows for a refusal to face the historical facts, as Moody would have it. Still, he concedes that although historians can argue among themselves, one cannot argue with myth. Neither can one argue with Moody's notion that historical myths may be "malignant." Yet such an assessment would depend entirely on how they are interpreted, as myths are neither good nor bad in themselves. This is where historians can, and do, differ from and argue with one another. Myths cannot simply be exploded or dismissed on the grounds that they have no foundation in empirical fact or no scientifically acceptable claim to truth. According to the historian M.A.G. Ó Tuathaigh, popular historical consciousness (of which myths constitute an integral part) is formed and mediated through "the 'felt experience' of authority and power, of oppression and poverty, class, gender, race" and used "purposefully and unconsciously - as memory, as sanction, as excuse, as emotional resource" by the members of a society. Therefore, it should be investigated as "an historical construct" in its own right rather than be dismissed as false history.²² This becomes an important consideration also in the context of Famine historiography, for here, too, the "destructive myths" of popular history are challenged by the revisionist "probing, critical search for truth about the past."²³

3.2. Revisionism and the Famine

According to Moody, the writing of the Famine from a nationalist point of view had engendered some "strong and bitter myths", particularly those of genocide, of food exports, and of the predatory landlord. As he saw it, these myths could not be substantiated because they had no factual historical basis. "Historical research", Moody wrote, "has drawn a very different picture" from the nationalist one of deliberate murder of the Irish people committed by the British government. The notion that food exports exacerbated the crisis was false, he argued, because "it remains true that the total food deficiency resulting from the potato failure in 1846 could not have been met by prohibiting the export of grain from Ireland." As for the myth of the predatory landlord, Moody held that "[t]he landlords as a class were not characteristically predatory nor the tenants as a class characteristically victimised."²⁴ From what we now know, it would appear that, in essence, Moody was right while Mitchel, O'Rourke *et al*

²² M.A.G. Ó Tuathaigh, "Irish Historical 'Revisionism': State of the art or ideological project?", in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 306-26 [323-24].

²³ Moody, "Irish History and Irish Mythology", p. 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

were wrong. Famine historians today generally do not credit the theory of a government-landlord conspiracy involving food exports and evictions to exterminate the Irish race. Yet because Moody's unqualified rejection of these myths implied a refusal to consider as history what was widely perceived as such, it also betrayed an underlying ideological positioning, in spite of the claim to impartiality. Richard Kearny has noted that

[t]o renounce completely the cultural situatedness of the *muthos* is to lapse into the lie of a *logos* elevated to the rank of absolute truth. When reason pretends to dispense thus with all mythic mediations, it risks becoming a sterile and self-serving nationalism – an ideology in its own right.²⁵

While it might be argued that nationalist historians credited the *muthos* at the expense of the *logos*, Moody's revisionist model advocated the reverse.

One of the earliest and most vociferous opponents of revisionism, Brendan Bradshaw, has criticized its practitioners for what he sees as their "impoverished and confused notion of myth."²⁶ Given Moody's claim that myth is "a way of refusing to face the historical facts",²⁷ Bradshaw's criticism is noteworthy. The Famine myths that Moody chose as examples of "popular misconceptions" incorporate precisely those issues which were central to Mitchel's agenda and which he used to politicize the catastrophe. Thus in the effort to dismiss these myths as more or less fictitious inventions serving nationalist propaganda, Moody overlooked the possibility that they, too, may have had some foundation in reality and that, in this respect, they cannot be disregarded as mere refusals to face facts. Myths, according to Paul Ricoeur, "have a history, because it is always through a process of interpretation and reinterpretation that they are kept alive. Myths have a history of their own." Accordingly, the type of myths Moody referred to are also part of history – and not only *political* history – and should be considered and treated as such. Ricoeur goes on to warn that "[w]e must critically assess the content of each myth and the basic intentions which animate it."²⁸ Critical assessment surely does not warrant the discrediting of a myth as false history simply because it is perceived as politically incorrect; aside from betraying an ideological positioning, this also undermines the claim to objectivity. Undoubtedly, such an assessment must address the political implications of the myth in question. But when the Famine myths are understood

²⁵ Kearny, *Transitions*, p. 277.

²⁶ Brendan Bradshaw, "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland", in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 191-216 [213].

²⁷ Moody, "Irish History and Irish Mythology", p. 86.

²⁸ Quoted in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 38, 39.

simply as products of nationalist propaganda, the role of lived experience in the construction of social memory is denied its relevance as a potential source of historical “fact.” Thus a critical evaluation of myths should also involve what the historian G.M. Young has referred to as “the real, central theme of history”, that is, “not what happened, but what people felt about it *when it was happening*” [emphasis added].²⁹ Moody apparently failed to recognize, or chose to ignore, this aspect of myth formation. In doing so, he also disregarded a part of history – the part which, in the words of Niall Ó Ciosáin, is reliable “not in terms of empirical facts or events of the kind favoured by document-based historiography” but “in terms of perceptions and experiences, what people actually thought was happening, which consequently formed not just their attitudes but even the events and facts which they used to tell the story of the Famine.”³⁰

Mitchel eventually “translated” the notion of genocide into the language of political rhetoric, but its essence was rooted in the experiences and perceptions of those who were, in one way or another, affected by the catastrophe. Contemporary eyewitness accounts suggest that there was among the victims an apparent, though rudimentary and unfocused sense of being wronged. Of course, employing such accounts as sources of evidence in history-writing is problematic because of their subjectivity. In this sense, they are particularly problematic for a revisionist history which insists on objective analysis and on subjecting passion to reason. Yet if they are examined not so much for their truth-claims as for what they reveal about people’s reactions to the Famine, they provide a key to understanding the subsequent popular appeal of Mitchel’s thesis. Thus, if the nationalist interpretation of the Famine is dismissed as false history, then lived experience is falsified by the same token. Obviously, contemporary accounts cannot be taken as representing the absolute truth since they are as likely to contain misinterpretations and misconceptions as any other account, including the allegedly objective ones offered by revisionist historians. But they should nevertheless be taken seriously as they constitute an important element in the story of the Famine. Because they offer an insight, however flawed, into the impact and effects of the tragedy on those who were exposed to it, contemporary accounts pose a challenge to Moody’s revisionist critique of the “received views” that have resulted in “destructive myths” rather than the truth, which only the “knowledge” of the historian can provide.

²⁹ G.M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* [1936] (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. vi.

³⁰ Niall Ó Ciosáin, “Famine memory and the popular representation of scarcity”, in McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 95-117 [114].

3.2.1. Food exports, free trade and government relief

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mitchel's notion of genocide was based on a compound of several factors affecting life in famine Ireland, such as food exports, relief policies, landlordism, evictions and emigration. Both contemporary accounts and folklore indicate how opinions were formed around these issues, often in ways which lend some credibility to the subsequent indictment of the government by Mitchel and other nationalist writers. Yet these opinions also disclosed ambiguities and contradictions reflecting differing points of view, confusion, failure to comprehend what was happening, and vacillation between resistance and resignation, condemnation and acceptance. Although contemporary observers such as Asenath Nicholson and Elizabeth Smith commented on the patience of the poor in the face of great deprivations, resignation to fate was by no means universal during the first years of the Famine. In the autumn of 1846, there were food riots with the express purpose of preventing exports, particularly in counties Clare and Limerick, but also in Cork and Mayo.³¹ In September, a crowd of up to 700 people in Westport forced five carts conveying oats to the town quay for export to turn back to the store, the people asserting that they "would not allow one grain of corn to leave the country as they were starving."³² In October, the magistrates of Ballina, County Mayo, received a note in which "a certain individual of the town" was implicated in "shipping oats at the present time, when the poor of Ballina are starving for want of food." The authors of the note begged leave to ask whether it was "lawful to let the grain out of the country, when such a state of things is allowable" and ended it with an overt threat: "[I]f so, you and every one of ye, may look to the consequences."³³ In the early stages of protests, however, people did not generally resort to violence, but priests as well as local gentry were acutely aware of what people suffering from want might be capable of. Already in June 1846, W.J. Bourke wrote to Bessborough, the Lord Lieutenant: "There is in this country plenty of provisions I hope for a long time, but if allowed to be taken out of it, there will be none left. Should this not be immediately prevented, the people would be driven to acts of violence." Similarly, the parish priest of Erris, County Mayo, observed that "how long a peasantry goaded by hunger may continue peaceably, no one can calculate."³⁴ In keeping with the policy of free trade, the British government did not even consider preventing food leaving the coun-

³¹ See Eiríksson, "Food supply and food riots", in Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150*, pp. 67-91.

³² Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 77.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 57.

try. Instead, more troops were sent to Ireland to help the local constabularies maintain law and order, a measure which caused further resentment: “Would to God the government would send us food instead of soldiers”, a starving man in Ballinrobe, County Mayo, was heard to complain as he watched a number of them marching into the town.³⁵

To those whose subsistence depended on the potato, the principles of free trade must have meant little or nothing. Rather than connect the flow of food out of the country with some government policy or economic theory which most of them would never have heard of, they would attribute it to a callous greediness perceived in local merchants, large farmers, and landlords. Thus the protests of the poor were mostly directed against the, to them, most obvious culprits: the rich. This was understandable since, as Christine Kinealy has noted, “the ships that left Ireland laden with food ... were doing so largely for the benefit of *Irish* merchants and traders” [original emphasis].³⁶ In Mitchel’s view, however, the fact that local merchants were implementing government policy was more telling. Mitchel made use of statistics – although he admittedly misinterpreted them – to support his claim that the government’s refusal to prohibit exports was part of a genocidal policy. Statistics presented and interpreted by modern historians indicate that there was no ground for such a claim, since imports demonstrably exceeded exports from the spring of 1847 on. Yet as Christine Kinealy has remarked, the export of foodstuffs other than grain has been largely ignored, and during the winter of 1846–47, “food exports exceeded food imports ... resulting in a ‘starvation gap’ in supplies.”³⁷ Statistics may provide facts, but they reveal nothing much about contemporary controversies surrounding this issue, and even less about its impact on the poor and destitute. While Irishmen such as Daniel O’Connell, William Smith O’Brien and Lord Cloncurry called for a ban on the export of food, others would have agreed with the Reverend J. Garrett, who held that such a course of action “would be the ruin of Ireland” because “[w]e have no manufactuory and consequently we must have universal bankruptcy if our grain, beef, pork and butter are not exported.”³⁸ Similar divergences of opinion were to be heard among English members of Parliament, indicating that the applicability of the principle of free trade, particularly in famine-stricken Ireland, was seriously questioned.

³⁵ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 137.

³⁶ Christine Kinealy, “The Great Irish Famine – A Dangerous Memory?”, in Gribben (ed.), *The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America*, pp. 239–53 [248].

³⁷ Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 66.

³⁸ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 22.

The debate was reflected in newspapers on both sides of the Irish Sea. As might be expected, the *Nation*, being the mouthpiece of Young Ireland, criticized the government for continuing to allow food to be exported: "The English are counting on the appearance of our food, as usual, at their tables; and if the ordinary commercial intercourse between the two islands shall be in operation at October next, another million of the Irish must perish."³⁹ When the efforts of the Mansion House Committee to influence government policy on this issue proved fruitless, the *Freeman's Journal* indignantly commented: "They may starve! Such in spirit, if not in words, was the reply given ... by the English Viceroy to ... the deputation which ... prayed that the food of this kingdom be preserved, lest the people thereof perish."⁴⁰ Even the *Times*, hardly notable for any inclination to sympathize with the afflicted Irish, commented that "[t]he very poor are reduced to nothing; and yet in that state witness the exportation of grain which they have sown or reaped, with hardly an expectation that its price will redeem themselves from hunger."⁴¹ Similarly, the *Illustrated London News* felt obliged to admit that "to a starving multitude, the spectacle of ship-loads of corn being taken away from where it is so grievously wanted is a painful and exciting one."⁴² Although there is no explicit criticism of government policy in these last two statements, they call attention to the human experience that tends to be lost in the maze of high politics and statistics. It requires no great leap of the imagination to appreciate how starving people seeing food shipped away out of their reach would react with moral outrage. It is precisely this perceived immorality of exports during a time of scarcity which has survived in popular memory and, as Niall Ó Ciosáin has remarked, "[i]ts prominence as an image within the popular culture of scarcity probably accounts for its impact on the popular readership of Mitchel, whether they were encountering [his] presentation directly or indirectly."⁴³ This aspect of the emergence of myth is ignored by Moody as he weighs the interpretations of nationalists then and later against modern statistical evidence and pronounces the former "a way of refusing to face the historical facts."

The revisionist tendency to exculpate the government is curiously at odds with how responsibility for the famine disaster was perceived by contemporary observers. As opposed to Mitchel, they did not generally see the government's relief measures as "contrivances for slaughter", yet the various schemes were

³⁹ Quoted in Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 49.

⁴¹ *Times*, 5 January 1846.

⁴² *Illustrated London News*, 10 October 1846.

⁴³ Ó Ciosáin, "Famine memory and the popular representation of scarcity", p. 108.

subject to increasingly severe criticisms by a great variety of people, including landlords, clergy, local authorities, and even relief officials themselves. For example, the public works scheme introduced by the Russell government in 1846-47 was seen by many as badly managed, insufficient in scope as well as in wages paid and, anticipating Mitchel, tantamount to a system of slow murder. Encumbered by a massive bureaucracy and vulnerable to various kinds of abuse, the scheme was widely perceived as a failure. As reported by Richard Webb of the Society of Friends,

[t]he general opinion throughout the country is, that the attempt to support the people by the public works ... was a great mistake; and that if the amount of money and labour expended in this way, had been employed in supplying the people with seed, and supporting them while they cultivated their grounds, a vast amount of death and suffering might have been avoided. A large number of the roads then constructed are incomplete, and are likely to continue so.⁴⁴

Jonathan Pim referred to “the injurious effects” arising from this particular form of relief, which “in numerous instances ... failed to attain its object” because “[n]ot only was relief given to many improper persons, but the really destitute able-bodied were often neglected; while, from the very nature of the relief, the helpless were frequently left altogether without assistance.”⁴⁵ Webb also commented on the difficulty of ascertaining the truth of the frequent complaints about abuses which arose “from the prevalence of what the people call ‘favour and faction;’ from the tendency to gratify the love of petty patronage; or from the malice arising from old grudges, or the desire to serve one’s own friends or one’s own tenants.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he was inclined to believe that such complaints were well founded. Many other contemporary accounts, including official documents, suggest that abuse was rather common and that local relief committees, consisting of county officials, Poor Law officials and clergy, were mainly to blame. The committees were responsible for preparing lists of people they considered to be in need of employment, while it fell to the inspectors of the Board of Works to examine applicants and revise the lists if and when destitution could not be proved in any one case. Under such circumstances, a conflict of interests was inevitable. Board of Works officials, acting under instructions from the Treasury, were anxious to keep the number employed as low as possible and thus clashed with relief committees, dishonest or otherwise,

⁴⁴ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 210.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

who strove for the opposite, while both claimed to be acting on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable. Accusations were thrown back and forth. Colonel Harry Jones, the Chairman of the Board of Works, complained that the relief committees only wanted to get “as many persons employed as possible” without considering the cost, and that “farmer, priest, landlord and tenant all make strong attempts to squeeze something out of the government.”⁴⁷ Members of the committees in their turn criticized the Board of Works for providing too little employment, thereby subjecting the poor to starvation. “The works at present in progress are totally insufficient”, declared the Ballaghderreen committee in August, and in October, they pointed out that “[e]mployment of 1,000 men in a barony with a population of 50,000 is a mere nothing.”⁴⁸

This controversy was reflected in the reactions of those who were most severely hit by the catastrophe and, consequently, most in need of assistance, and it served only to confuse the issue for them. Because they were “fully impressed” with the notion that their local authorities had been “armed with powers to employ all that present themselves”, as Dr John Meekings put it⁴⁹, they were utterly bewildered at being told that they were not eligible for relief on the public works, or that employment was not available. As in the case of food exports, there was a general tendency to cast blame locally, which meant that individual members of relief committees, such as landlords and magistrates, were accused of favouritism or, in cases where committees adhered strictly to government regulations, harshness and callous indifference. Yet there were also those who understood, or were prompted to understand, that relief in the form of public works was not ultimately contingent on local authorities. This is evident, for example, in a number of personal appeals, either by individuals or groups of people, addressed to high-ranking officials such as the Lord Lieutenant. One such appeal, signed by the parish priest and 173 inhabitants of a County Mayo parish, was sent in August 1846. The signatories pointed out that, despite the loss of the previous potato crop, they had “cheerfully and peaceably” managed to subsist during the summer “without as yet any government work or food.” But, they continued, owing to the loss of the early crop “by the rot” and “the stalks of the late crop being blighted”, they were now “in destitution and despair and most humbly beg for work.” The appeal was endorsed and forwarded by the Reverend J. Garrett. A week later, Garrett wrote to the Lord Lieutenant again with reference to

⁴⁷ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, pp. 103, 56.

⁴⁸ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 58, 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the memorial which I put before you last week ... to which you did me the favour to say that it was referred to the Board of Works. This reply has sadly aggravated the sufferings of the expectant poor as they have experienced before from the Board many disappointments.⁵⁰

Although there is no explicit criticism of the government in this letter, it does suggest that the poor were becoming aware of, and disappointed with, the role of the government in the crisis. Apparently, individual clergymen played a significant role in this transfer of resentment. Many of them tended to blame the Board of Works and, by extension, the government, for starvation and deaths. They were exasperated by the bureaucracy involved in the public works scheme as well as by the perceived inefficiency of its executors, and this feeling was relayed to their parishioners. "This is the man who is starving you", the parish priest of Islandeady told his congregation while pointing at the Board of Works inspector for County Mayo.⁵¹ But regardless of who people ultimately blamed, complaints about the relief works were abundant and specific. In some places, those who were directly affected resorted to demonstrations, riots, and even strikes to call attention to their grievances.

As suggested by contemporary accounts, the most common complaints pertained to delays in commencing the works, the inadequacy of and tardiness in payment of wages, and the imposition of task work. Because of the huge number of applications and the complex bureaucracy involved, the Board was swamped with paperwork and approved projects were often very slow getting started. For the people who had lost their entire potato crop in the autumn of 1846, this meant increased hardship as they had no means of procuring food, either from government supplies or private traders. In October, a parish priest in County Mayo wrote to the Lord Lieutenant, saying that "[t]here is not a single labourer out of a population of 5,844 human souls at this moment in employment[.] ... What are they to do? Must they perish after being promised relief? ... A month has now elapsed. There is no employment."⁵² The parish priest of Swinford reported that there were "310 persons in [his] parish in a state of utter destitution and kept a whole week out of employment", and he attributed this to "the culpable neglect of the district engineer."⁵³ Similarly, the Relief Committee of the Swinford district tended to fault the government, albeit implicitly, by stating that "[t]here ex-

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 51, 52.

⁵¹ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 152.

⁵² Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 89.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 122.

ists in some quarter or other a want of inclination or competence to give the people work.”⁵⁴ As the price of meal kept rising through the winter of 1846-47, the average daily wage of six- or eightpence paid on the works was not nearly sufficient to sustain a large family. William Forster of the Society of Friends observed the effects of this imbalance between wages and food prices in Connemara in January 1847. “Four and sixpence per week”, he wrote, “the sole resource of a family of six; with Indian meal, their cheapest food, at 2s. 10d. to 4s. per stone! What is this but slow death – a mere enabling the patient to endure for a little longer time the disease of hunger?”⁵⁵ The situation was further exacerbated by delays in payment of wages, often due to the inability of the understaffed Board of Works to cope with an ever-increasing amount of people employed. Inevitably, the Board was more often blamed than excused for this state of affairs. “I have seen the poor things come in”, declared the Reverend Mostyn of Foxford, County Mayo, “day after day, week after week, for their few shillings ... and they were told by the paymaster that they could get no money as the pay sheets were not forwarded to him. There is gross negligence somewhere.”⁵⁶

Because the government believed, perhaps with some justification, that fixed wages encouraged idleness and abuse, task work was introduced after August 1846. This was greatly disliked as it increased delays in the payment of wages and further depleted the income of those who were already weakened by hunger and disease and, therefore, unable to work hard enough to secure a subsistence wage. As reports of deaths from starvation became more frequent during the winter, criticism of the relief scheme intensified. The parish priest of Claremorris described the condition of the labourers in the area, saying that “some of these from extreme hunger are not now able to crawl to work. Some gangs working with all their might, receive only three pence per day and that withheld more than three weeks. They are obliged to get meal at usurer’s prices.” In the priest’s opinion, this type of employment was “only a slow but sure system of starvation for innumerable families.”⁵⁷ Besides suffering from hunger, labourers were also weakened by exposure to inclement weather and, particularly in remote areas, by having to walk for miles to and from their work. Writing for the *Illustrated London News* in February, 1847, James Mahony reported from Skibbereen, County Cork:

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 154.

⁵⁶ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

The people ... say that whoever escapes the fever is sure of falling sick on the road (the Public Works), as they are, in many instances, compelled to walk from three to six miles, and sometimes a greater distance, to work, and back again in the evening, without partaking of a morsel of food. Added to this, they are, in a great number of instances, standing in bogs and wet places, which so affects them, that many of the poor fellows have been known to drop down at their work.⁵⁸

The account of William Smith, the civil engineer in charge of the public works in one County Roscommon district, indicates that the system was liable to criticism also from the officials who were struggling to implement it. "The late public works", Smith asserted, "were an expedient got up in a hurry, and a sorry expedient they were. The Board of Works feel as much the discredit attachable to them as any persons can do; but many allowances must be made for the imperfection of the system."⁵⁹ One deplorable result of this "imperfection" was the delay in payment of wages which, as Smith noted, had dire consequences for the labourers:

[T]he Pay-Clerks were occupied every day in the week at different places, and the poor, not being paid regularly, were obliged to get trust from the truck-dealers of the country, at most exorbitant prices, frequently above those of the market - so that their wages were eaten up before they received them.⁶⁰

In one part of the district, the works had been commenced without a pay-clerk being assigned, and the workers there had been three weeks without payment. On inspecting this area, Smith found the people "in confusion, and in a most deplorable condition." He ascribed this state of affairs to the neglect of the employers, adding that he dreaded "to think of the amount of sufferings endured by the labourers and their families" where such disregard of duties was allowed.⁶¹ The system of task work, Smith maintained, was unfair, disregarded the condition of the emaciated labourers, and led to unnecessary discontent and disturbances:

Those at task-work had fivepence, and in some cases as low as threepence, per diem. In other cases, again, an opposite extreme existed[.] ... This naturally created much discontent and ill-feeling amongst those who were over-tasked and underpaid[.] ... I fear there was not in all cases sufficient sympathy for the present sufferings of the poor - a feeling quite compatible

⁵⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 20 February 1847.

⁵⁹ Smith, *A Twelve Months' Residence in Ireland during the Famine and the Public Works*, p. 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 69.

with a firm and honest discharge of duty[.] ... [D]isturbances are attributable wholly, or in a great degree, to such errors.⁶²

Judging from his own experiences on the public works, Smith concluded that they were “quite inadequate to the wants of the people.”⁶³ Eventually, even Colonel Jones himself had to admit that the works were not the safeguard against starvation that they were intended to be since the people, “their bodily strength gone and spirits depressed ... have not the power to exert themselves sufficiently to earn the ordinary day’s wages.”⁶⁴ What Jones omitted to mention was that, even if people had been fit enough to manage the work, their wages would, in many cases, not have been sufficient to keep starvation at bay.

As the winter of 1846-47 progressed, there was an alarming increase in reports of deaths from starvation. Coroners’ reports and verdicts returned by inquest juries, sometimes declaring deaths to have been caused by government neglect, were frequently published in local newspapers. In County Waterford, a jury decided that “death was caused through the negligence of the government in not sending food into the country in due time”, and in Galway, a verdict of willful murder was brought in against Lord John Russell for “not taking adequate steps to meet the crisis.”⁶⁵ A similar verdict was returned by a jury in Bantry, County Cork. Private letters to newspapers, government officials and relief associations reflected the impact of these inquest reports on public opinion and the growing disillusionment with government policy. “Political economy is doing its bloody work”, claimed one such letter:

One day we read of 47 deaths from starvation in Mayo, ratified by so many coroners juries. Another, we read of frightful destitution in Skibbereen, dreadfully augmented by fever[.] ... Not a single day passes by without abundant evidence of the total inadequacy of the present government, to wield the destinies of this great empire, or to preserve from *actual starvation* the great majority of this long misgoverned and unfortunate country [original emphasis] ⁶⁶

Another letter expressed similar feelings of horror and resentment: “The mind recoils from the contemplation of the scenes we are compelled to witness every hour. Ten inquests in Bantry - there should have been at least *two hundred* inquests. Each day - each hour produces its own victims - Holocausts offered

⁶² Ibid., p. 94.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 97.

⁶⁵ Thomas P. O’Neill, “The Organization and Administration of Relief, 1845-52”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 209-59 [233-34].

⁶⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 1 January 1847.

at the shrine of political economy” [original emphasis].⁶⁷ By this time, many more deaths might have been ascribed to typhus, dysentery, and other diseases than to actual starvation, but insufficient nourishment was still perceived as the underlying, primary cause. Reporting from Ballina in March, the assistant district magistrate stated that “[t]he number of deaths in this parish for the last 6 weeks is about 22 per day. It is true that starvation did not strike the deathblow in all those cases, but in all of them it was the principal agent.” He also pointed out, as did many others throughout the country, particularly in the west and south-west, that “the people are not supplied with food nor with the means to purchase it.”⁶⁸

The government’s decisions not to interfere with the food trade, to reduce the number of its grain depots and keep them closed as long as private merchants were able to keep up with the demand, and eventually to sell the grain at the local market price, were all perceived as contributing to the growing destitution and consequent deaths during the winter and the following spring. “I deeply regret the total abandonment of the people to corn and flour traders”, Father Mathew wrote to Trevelyan in December. “They charge from 50 to 100 per cent profit. Cargoes of maize are purchased before their arrival, and are sold, like railway shares, passing through different hands before they are ground and sold to the poor.”⁶⁹ Father Mathew was not the only one to complain about hoarding and profiteering. Commissary-General Hewetson observed the phenomenon in Limerick and, based on what he had heard from commanders of American ships about “the enormous profits the English and Irish houses are making by their dealings with the States”, drew his own conclusions: “I sometimes am inclined to think houses give large prices for cargoes imported for a market, to keep them up”, he wrote to Trevelyan, “and the wretched people suffering so intensely from the high prices of food, augmented by every party through whose hands it passes before it reaches them, it is quite disheartening to look upon.”⁷⁰ In a letter to the editor of the *Ballyshannon Herald*, the writer contended that the “scheme of trusting to private speculation and individual enterprise to provide food for the starving multitude” was both absurd and inhumane. “What cares individual enterprise for famishing nations?” he asked, adding that “[t]he object of individual enterprise is to put money into individual pockets.

⁶⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 22 January 1847.

⁶⁸ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Tomás O’Riordan, *Ireland 1815-1870* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), p. 70.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Tóibín and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 182.

Perish, if that object can be obtained, is the language of individual enterprise.”⁷¹ Members of the Swinford Board of Guardians proclaimed that “we have no confidence in the merchants of the country...as [they] have taken advantage of the poverty of the people and have raised food even beyond famine prices[.] ... We therefore solicit the interference of the government, to prevent the people from starvation, to which they are reduced by being left to the speculation of heartless merchants.”⁷²

The government chose not to interfere. Already by September 1846, it was almost impossible for those who could not afford to pay “famine prices” to obtain meal. The government depots had been closed in August, even though the total failure of the potato crop was already evident. What was left of the meal purchased under Sir Robert Peel’s relief scheme was released for distribution in the poorest districts, but it proved to be a drop in the ocean. “The supply to Swinford depot is totally unequal to the wants of the people, some of whom have to come a distance of more than 10 miles for a miserable half stone of meal and have sometimes to wait an entire day before they obtain it”, reported Dr Burke, the district physician, while George Vaughan Jackson of the Board of Guardians stated that “[t]he supplies sent to Swinford and Ballina are inadequate[.] ...Great privation is felt by the poor between the exhaustion of one supply and the arrival of another at the government stores.”⁷³ The depots remained closed until December, in spite of desperate applications from miserably destitute areas such as Skibbereen and a great deal of criticism from local relief committees, and even from some commissariat officers. Inevitably, this apparent refusal to help the growing hordes of starving people was held against the government, particularly as verdicts of death from starvation became everyday occurrences. “These deaths”, declared the parish priest of Claremorris, “I pronounce so many murders. I must attribute them to the officials of the government.”⁷⁴

3.2.2. The rights and duties of property

Revisionism sought to banish the notion of the predatory landlord to the realm of myth since, as Theodore Moody put it, the landlords as a class were not *characteristically* predatory. Contemporary sources testify to the accuracy of Moody’s assessment by acknowledging the benevolence of many Irish land-

⁷¹ *Ballyshannon Herald*, 29 January 1847.

⁷² Swords, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 87-88.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

lords even while they were struggling with great financial difficulties of their own, particularly in the later stages of the famine. Yet contemporaries were not usually inclined to be as lenient on them as Moody seemed to be. “The worst faults of the landlords appear to have been not heartlessness or heavyhandedness”, he argued, “but rather apathy and neglect, bred by incumbrances on their estates, traditions of extravagance, and the impossibility of taking a benevolent and instructive interest in a myriad of very small holdings.”⁷⁵ The implication here is that the myth derives from a notion that landlords were heartless and heavyhanded. But since these traits do not “appear” to have been their “worst faults”, Moody does not offer any consideration of how they may have contributed to the notion of the predatory landlord, nor of why they have featured so prominently in the myth. The landlords’ “worst” faults as presented here may be understood as detrimental only to their own position. Moody does not engage with the possibility that these faults, by affecting the lives of the social inferiors of the landlords, may have contributed to the formation of the myth. He does not ask how far apathy and neglect can be justified on the plea of financial difficulties, if those difficulties are obvious results of “traditions of extravagance”, nor whether “impossible” is an acceptable excuse for a lack of interest in small holdings if self-interest, fuelled by the prospect of increased income, has had anything to do with the emergence of that “myriad”. Contemporary sources, on the other hand, indicate that there is good reason to raise such questions. In addition, they suggest that this myth, too, has a foundation in people’s experiences and perceptions, misconceived or otherwise, of landlordism during the Famine. However, as in the case of exports and government relief, ambiguities and contradictions feature also in contemporary views of landlords.

“More Turnip Justice”, was the eye-catching headline of a short news item in the *Cork Examiner* in November 1847. “Will you believe me”, the correspondent wrote,

when I have to inform you that a poor woman from the Parish of Inniscarra, who through hunger, happened to pluck up a single turnip in the noon day, from one of the fields of Sir George Colthurst of Ardrum, was summoned to appear before the Bench of Magistrates ... on Tuesday last, and fined for such trifling offence in the round sum of 20s. by the worthy magistrates.⁷⁶

Reflecting the stunned incredulity of its author, this item exemplifies the nature of much of the contemporary reaction to “landlord’s justice” and the “rights of property” under famine conditions. A letter to the editor of the *Mayo Telegraph*

⁷⁵ Moody, “Irish History and Irish Mythology”, p. 83.

⁷⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 8 November 1847.

called attention to the case of “three of the most destitute” in the parish of Kiltimagh, whose oats, “their only means of subsistence”, had been “seized and canted by his lordship’s (Lord Lucan [*sic*]) driver and subsequently ejectment decrees have been obtained against them.” The writer pointed out that it was “by his lordship’s special directions the notices to quit were served” and asked “what think you of the time that had been fixed for exacting ... the rent? During the late frost, deep snow and storm!”⁷⁷ The practice of seizing crops and livestock for rent became increasingly common as destitution grew and tenants fell into arrears which they were unable to pay. Phelim O’Hara, a small farmer near Ballina, being “reduced in circumstances” and in no position to pay his rent in November 1847, was consequently punished by his landlord: “He seized all my oats ... and left me without one pound of human food for six in family, but living on turnips ever since and, to grow in my misery, we have them exhausted.”⁷⁸ From Bantry, County Cork, Jeremiah O’Callaghan reported the case of a widow with five young children whose “entire property” consisted in “a small plot of potato ground.” Before it was time to harvest, the crop was confiscated by her landlord. “He sent his workmen to dig out the unripe potatoes and had them conveyed ... to the Bantry market to be disposed of”, O’Callaghan related, adding that “I regret to say that this is not a singular case. In the west, what is now spared by the blight is about to be carried off by the Landlord.”⁷⁹

In spite of ample contemporary testimony to the patience and resignation of the people, there is also evidence to the contrary; they did not consistently submit to what they perceived as harsh or unjust treatment. The *Cork Examiner* noted that

[i]n Mayo and some other parts of the western province there appears to be a regular scramble for the crops between the chief landlords (who are generally weighed down by embarrassments), the middlemen, and the farmers – large and small. In all directions keepers are watching the crops, to prevent their removal; and the peasantry ... are exerting their ingenuity to make away with the produce.⁸⁰

It was not unusual for agents and bailiffs to be attacked as they attempted to confiscate the crop or livestock of tenants in arrears. Mark McDonnell, a landlord’s agent in the parish of Ballaghderreen, County Mayo, gave a sworn statement saying that while he was “attempting to drive and take away some cattle

⁷⁷ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 150.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁷⁹ *Cork Examiner*, 2 August 1847.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 October 1847.

for the recovery of ... rents, I was assaulted, struck and put in terror of my life, by persons residing on the said lands.”⁸¹ Incidents like this were recorded in numerous other areas around the country, but the attempts at resistance seldom or never resulted in anything aside from additional coercive measures. Jonathan Pim of the Society of Friends was one among several contemporary observers who thought that coercion alone was not the answer to the problem. “Experience has abundantly shown”, he wrote, “that it is not sufficient to endeavour to repress crime by the terror of the law: it is also necessary to search out the proximate and remote causes, and, by removing the temptations to crime, to diminish its amount.” Pim saw the land system as a major bone of contention in the strained relations between landlord and tenant. “The objects of these agrarian disturbances are various”, he wrote, “but they always imply a contest between the landlords and the tenants – whether to obtain the possession of land, to prevent ejectment, to obtain a reduction, to prevent an advance of rents, or from vindictive motives.” In his opinion, disturbances and outrages would not have “disgraced” the country if “a good system of laws for the regulation of real property had existed.”⁸²

Pim’s colleague James Hack Tuke, too, referred to the apparent hostility of tenants towards landlords and vice versa. Basing his opinion on observations made in parts of Connaught in 1846 and 1847, he asserted that “[t]he relation of landlord and tenant is, in truth, lost; in no country in the world are these duties less recognised than in Ireland.”⁸³ Like Pim, he attributed this state of affairs partly to mismanagement and excessive spending which had led to mortgages and debts too large for the present nominal owners to handle, and partly to the laws which hindered the sale of properties thus encumbered. Yet he did not think that these were the only reasons for the present dilapidation, nor for the deplorable state of the poor tenantry insofar as that could be attributed to landlord neglect. “It may safely be said of the landlords of Erris generally”, he wrote, “that there appears as much a want of willingness as of ability on their part, to do anything for the benefit of the starving tenantry or wasted estates.” At the same time, he was careful to point out that “it would be utterly unjust to blame a great portion of the present landlords” since circumstances obviously prevented them from “discharging the duties of ownership.”⁸⁴ And although he was generally very sympathetic to the plight of the victims of famine, there

⁸¹ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 232.

⁸² *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 126.

⁸³ Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847*, p. 40.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 40.

are in his reports traces of a lingering suspicion that, in some cases, the tenants themselves were perhaps partly to blame for their situation in relation to the landlord. He was nevertheless firm in his view that landlords had a moral obligation towards their tenants, especially having in mind “how much the division of land in many parts of Ireland, has been promoted by the landlords to increase their own political influence.” The impression that the cottiers and small farmers were “too generally rack-rented ... and have no confidence in the justice or mercy of those who have the land in charge” was, for Tuke, a further confirmation of landlord oppression.⁸⁵ Having witnessed the exercise and effects of “landlord privilege” in the form of seizing crops for rent, he vehemently condemned the practice: “The landlords of Mayo, as well as many other portions of Connaught, as a class (there are many noble exceptions who feel and see the impolicy and evil of such proceedings), are pursuing a course which cannot fail to add to the universal wretchedness and poverty which exist.”⁸⁶ On the whole, Tuke’s testimony suggests that the term “predatory” is justified in describing many a landlord at the time, but also that to label them all as “characteristically” so would be an unjust exaggeration.

Even so, there were many contemporaries who did not hesitate to condemn all landlords as predatory oppressors responsible for the misery of their tenants. A tenant farmer writing to the *Cork Examiner* in 1847 asked: “Who were the parties having the power who passed all the laws now in existence between landlord and tenant? ... Who are the parties that have brought famine, and its accompanying miseries on the people?” The answer, according to the writer, was obvious as well as generally accepted: “I say without fear of being contradicted – The landlords. They have unmercifully enforced the laws made by themselves in recovering rack rents!”⁸⁷ Sidney Godolphin Osborne, too, condemned rack-renting as an obvious strategy of landlords for supporting an extravagant lifestyle. Rack-rents, he claimed, “upheld by the competition for potato land, gave that fictitious value to land, which begot the extravagance, which again was the father of [the] encumbrances, now forcing the sale of so much Irish property.”⁸⁸ Like Tuke, Osborne held landlords partly responsible for the excessive subdivision of land:

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 6, 13.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 8 December 1847. It is difficult to determine to what extent cottiers and labourers entertained similar views since they left very few records behind. However, the folklore material suggests that there was a rather widespread perception of landlord oppression and cruelty among the lower classes.

⁸⁸ Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, p. 141.

From the many curious statistics in this matter, which I have seen; it is quite clear to me, that a very large amount of Irish property, owes its existence solely to a system, which was perseveringly and wilfully encouraged; that very system of sub-letting, which now is cried down[.] ... So long as "Pat's" lazy bed of potatos [*sic*], enabled him to pay the Rack-rent, which kept up the old style of Irish living ... a style notorious for its extravagance; Pat might have slept and bred as much as he liked; the more mouths, the more potatos [*sic*] would be wanted – the more competition for potato land; such competition was the very soul or rack-rent.⁸⁹

While thus criticizing landlords, Osborne also took the opportunity to make ironic references to the alleged indolence of the Irish peasants. "They have been in one sense a most extraordinary tenantry", he wrote, "lazy, when cultivating their patch of ground for themselves, they still even in their laziness, paid rents, from which large mansions, with miles of demesne walls, have been built, their owners supported in affluence."⁹⁰

The author of a letter to the Belfast *Vindicator* fumed that "the rich wrap themselves up in their own importance, and shun their dependants as a plague[.] ... The rent is being called for, in some instances, with merciless perseverance." Absentees were the particular target of this writer's indictment of landlords. They were, he claimed, "as they have ever been, absent when either honour or duty calls; let it not be disguised, there is no real sympathy among them for the starving people." In conclusion, he asserted that "[i]t will not pass to 'shab' away to England, with their people's money in their pockets, and leave them to the tender mercies of the heartless, ignorant bog-bailiffs, and screwing agents, whose pay depends on the amounts wrung from the unfortunate class committed to their charge."⁹¹ Absenteeism was a rather common phenomenon, particularly in Connaught and Munster, and much criticized by contemporaries as a major cause of destitution and misery among the poor during the Famine years. Reports from county correspondents to the Central Committee of the Society of Friends give an indication of how widespread absenteeism was and how it was detrimental to the relief effort as absentees tended to contribute little or nothing to local relief funds.⁹² This general non-contribution was the subject of angry editorials and letters in various newspapers. The *Carlow Sentinel* vowed that "we shall do our duty fearlessly in calling on the non-residential proprietors to come forward and

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

⁹¹ Quoted in John Killen (ed.), *The Famine Decade*, p. 74.

⁹² See *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, Appendix IV, pp. 212-16.

to lend their cooperation or they will, when too late, regret the consequences of their neglect.” The paper acknowledged the contributions of “a few”, but expressed its disgust with the Earls of Kenmare and Portarlington “upon whose estates a vast mass of hideous poverty exists”, and claimed that “[w]e have not heard that 1s. of their money has yet been contributed, although their agents draw large sums from the extensive estates of these two noblemen.”⁹³ In response to a list of landlords contributing to a local relief fund published by the *Cork Examiner*, a reader sent a list of those who had not contributed at all, together with the following comment: “All *estated gentlefolk* these, who leave the expense of providing for the poor, in addition to the trouble of looking after *their paupers*, to the few subscribers whose names you publish[.] ... No wonder the *Times* should say the Irish landlords ‘don’t do their duty’” [original emphasis].⁹⁴

Although the existence of benevolent landlords was acknowledged, and their efforts to relieve the misery duly praised, contemporary opinion on the whole tended to castigate Irish landlords. Critical voices representing a broad spectrum of society, from farmers to clergymen, from relief workers and administrators to bishops and lawyers, were raised. Even landlords themselves, especially those who felt that they had done their duty, sometimes found fault with their peers. John Hamilton, a Donegal landlord, was convinced that the majority of the absentees had little or no thought for their tenants’ welfare, but he was also adamant that many resident landowners were almost equally neglectful of their duties.⁹⁵ Elizabeth Smith, having “evidence against them that would fit me for a witness before the Committee of the House”, declared that “[i]t’s nonsense to talk of good landlords as the rule, they are no such thing, they are only the exception.”⁹⁶ In this apparently general censure of landlordism, Irish and British opinion for once coincided, although not entirely for the same reasons. The *Illustrated London News* opined that the Irish landlords had exploited their tenants to such an extent that the latter had been reduced to serfdom, and that “the Irish cotter [*sic*] is as much a serf as the Russian peasant, with the difference that he is worse fed.” The paper also claimed that

the long list of legal but heartless practices that reach England from the other side of the channel have hardened Englishmen against those who have for

⁹³ Quoted in the *Times*, 11 January 1847.

⁹⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 23 March 1847.

⁹⁵ See Dermot James, *John Hamilton of Donegal, 1800-1884* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 1998), p. 184.

⁹⁶ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 126.

centuries held the fate of Ireland in their hands[.] ... [W]ith the possession of the property of the island, an absolute monopoly of political power, patronage and place ... the dominant class in Ireland have reduced ... Ireland to this [famine] ⁹⁷

The *Times*, commenting on the reluctance of Irish landlords to contribute to poor relief, venomously declared that “[a] class which pampers a population of dogs, and suffers a human population to perish, calls for the hardest terms that eloquent indignation can supply and the sternest treatment that legislation can devise.”⁹⁸ Lord Dufferin, himself the proprietor of large estates in Ulster, had nothing but contempt for his Irish brethren. “They left their people to grow up and multiply like brute beasts”, he wrote to Lady John Russell, “they stifled in them by their tyranny all hope and independence and desire of advancement, they made them cowards and liars, and have now left them to die off from the face of the earth.”⁹⁹

But concern about the effects of landlordism on the lower orders was not always the chief incentive for British criticism. What seemed to gall the castigators most was that these proprietors had the nerve to demand government assistance in a matter which, in accordance with their line of duty, should have been their own responsibility. Anthony Trollope alluded to this perceived anomaly several times in his letters to the *Examiner* published between August 1849 and May 1850. According to Trollope, the “most fearful feature” of the winter of 1846-47 was “the inactivity and want of self-denial by those who shrieked to Government their loud demand that the famine should be taken from their doors.” The only real effort the landlords made, he asserted, was to “secure as large a portion as possible of the funds provided by the Government.”¹⁰⁰ In a letter from the Treasury to Lord Monteagle, Charles Trevelyan complained that the gentry had, “with rare exceptions, confined themselves to memorials and deputations calling upon the government to do everything, as if they have themselves no part to perform in this great crisis.”¹⁰¹ Thomas Campbell Foster, writing for the *Times*, sympathized with the government thus besieged by clamouring beggars:

⁹⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 20 March 1847.

⁹⁸ *Times*, 9 March 1847.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 326.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Trollope, *The Irish Famine: Six Letters to the Examiner, 1849-50*, ed. Lance Tingay (London: Silverbridge Press, 1987), pp. 11-12.

¹⁰¹ Noel Kissane (ed.), *The Irish Famine: A Documentary History* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995), p. 51.

How sickening must it be to a statesman to hear an absentee landlord, who never gave a thought about his tenantry, except how he could extract the most rent from them ... prate in Parliament about the evils which afflict Ireland, and chiding the minister for not being willing to vote large sums, wrung from the industry of the rest of the empire, in support of some scheme for the employment of the poor in Ireland.¹⁰²

The paper wholeheartedly agreed with and advanced opinions like these and warned that

nothing will strike as deadly a blow, not only at the dignity of Irish character, but also the elements of Irish prosperity, as a confederacy of rich proprietors to dun the national Treasury, and to eke out from our resources that employment for the poor which they are themselves bound to provide, by every sense of duty, to a land from which they derive their incomes.¹⁰³

The mass evictions starting in 1847 and peaking in 1849-50 probably did more than anything else to incriminate Irish landlords in the opinion of their contemporaries. Some of the clearances, notably those in counties Mayo and Galway and in the Kilrush Union in West Clare, received wide publicity and were universally condemned. The *Tyrawley Herald*, shocked by the “house leveling” on Sir Roger Palmer’s estates in Erris, denounced the proceedings and declared that “such conduct, at any time, should be considered as heartless, but at present, when want and death are decimating the poor people we look upon it as monstrous, and the promoters of it less humanised than savages.”¹⁰⁴ Equally outraged, the editor of the *Cork Examiner* wrote:

The destruction of houses is going on steadily. Whenever the landlords have an opportunity of demolishing a human habitation, they raze it to the ground. They look upon the razing of cabins as a famous plan clearing off human encumbrances from their properties. And, in the ardour of their zeal for this great plan ... they are frequently as deaf as adders to the pleadings of humanity.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, p. 58.

¹⁰³ *Times*, 22 September 1846.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Hamrock (ed.), *The Famine in Mayo*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1847.



The ejectment, *Illustrated London News*, 16 December 1848

A correspondent of the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* reporting on evictions claimed that not only were the bad landlords “going to the extremities of cruelty and tyranny”, but even the good ones were “going to the bad.” However, he also noted that they are both “suffered by a truckling and heartless government to make a wilderness of the country and a waste of human life.”¹⁰⁶ These examples of media opinion indicate that, even though landlords were seen as the immediate culprits, the government could not be vindicated – both were to blame for the terrible consequences of mass evictions. The *Tipperary Vindicator* delivered a thundering indictment implicating both:

We do not say that there exists a conspiracy to uproot the ‘mere Irish’; but we do aver, that the fearful system of wholesale ejectment, of which we daily hear, and which we daily behold, is a mockery of the eternal laws of God – a flagrant outrage on the principles of nature.¹⁰⁷

In statements such as these, there are already inklings of Mitchel’s subsequent conspiracy charge: the “deadly alliance” between landlords and government.

The Catholic clergy were no more lenient than the press in condemning the clearances and what they perceived as the landlords’ part in them. In an open letter to the landlords in the area, Fr Kelliher of Schull, County Cork,

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in James Donnelly, “Mass Evictions and the Great Famine”, in Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, pp. 155-73 [165-66].

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in the *Illustrated London News*, 16 December 1848.

pronounced them guilty of bringing about all the present misery. “The disgrace and the criminality are yours”, he wrote, “but for two or three exceptions.”¹⁰⁸ The Catholic bishops, after they had finally decided to speak up, made their view public:

We behold our poor not only crushed and overwhelmed by the awful visitation of heaven, but frequently the victims of the most ruthless oppression that ever disgraced the annals of humanity[.] ... [T]he desolating track of the exterminator is to be traced on too many parts of the country – in those levelled cottages and roofless abodes where so many virtuous and industrious families have been torn by brute force ... and flung upon the highway to perish in the extremity of want.¹⁰⁹

Having witnessed some evictions and the effects of them in Kilrush, Sidney Godolphin Osborne resorted to similar language. “Eviction, as carried out in this part of Ireland”, he wrote, “is very much the same as Extermination.”¹¹⁰ Conspiracy, extinction, extermination – the language suggests that the notion of genocide would not have been totally alien to these clerics. Nor would it have been so to Father McMahon of Causeway, County Kerry. Referring to the landlords who had been carrying out evictions in three surrounding parishes as “thugs”, he asserted that “it is clear that they are determined upon utterly exterminating the peasantry” and urged the necessity of putting a stop to their “murderous proceedings.” McMahon also perceived a connection between the clearances and the amended Poor Law, thus linking the government to the destruction carried out by landlords: “It [the Poor Law] places the poor man hopelessly and helplessly at the mercy of his destroyers; and with the true spirit of a British law, while it holds out relief, it inflicts death.”¹¹¹

The Irish correspondent of the *London Illustrated News* – probably the same James Mahony who reported from Skibbereen in 1846 – echoed the opinions of McMahon in a series of articles published between December 1849 and February 1850. Under the heading of “Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the new poor-law”, these articles took the evictions in the Kilrush Union as their starting point. In between descriptions of eviction scenes, accompanied by sketches reinforcing the impressions relayed by the text, Mahony commented on what he saw as the cause of the desolation he was trying to describe. “The present

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 283.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Tim P. O'Neill, “Famine Evictions”, in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), pp. 29-70 [50].

¹¹⁰ Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, p. 155.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Donnelly, “Mass Evictions and the Great Famine”, in Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 167.

condition of the Irish”, he maintained, “has been mainly brought on by ignorant and vicious legislation.” In his view, the most malignant feature of that legislation was the Poor Law, “said to be for the relief of the people and the means of their salvation”, but which turned out to be “the instrument of their destruction.” Although Mahony found little or no excuse for the actions of the landlords, his severest criticisms were reserved for the government and its policy. “Calmly and quietly from Westminster itself, which is the centre of civilization”, he wrote, “did the decree go forth which has made the temporary but terrible visitation of a potato rot the means of exterminating, through the slow process of disease and houseless starvation, nearly the half of the Irish.”¹¹² In accusatory language, angry as well as ironic and worthy of a Mitchel, Mahony elaborated on how the amended Poor Law had become the bane of Ireland:

The instant the Poor-law was passed, and property was made responsible for poverty, the whole of the landowners, who had before been careless about the people, and often allowed them to plant themselves on unattended spots, or divide their tenancies – delighted to get the promise of a little additional rent – immediately became deeply interested in preventing that, and in keeping down the number of the people. Before they had rates to pay, they cared nothing for them; but the law and their self-interest made them care, and made them extirpators. Nothing less than some general desire like that of cupidity falling in with an enactment, and justified by a theory ... could have effected such wide-spread destruction. Even humanity was enlisted by the Poor-law on the side of extirpation. As long as there was no legal provision for the poor, a landlord had some repugnance to drive them from every shelter; but the instant the law took them under its protection, and forced the landowner to pay a rate to provide for them, repugnance ceased; they had a legal home, however inefficient, to go to; and eviction began[.] ... English notions and English habits ... impressed law-makers and the landlords of Ireland with a strong desire to enlarge and consolidate farms, and clear them of squatters and sub-tenants, who had formerly been permitted.

In conclusion, Mahony contended that the potato failure “threw the people at the mercy of the Government, and the Government used its power directly and indirectly, in accordance with the theory, to clear the land[.] ... The system intended to relieve the poor ... has at once made it the interest, and therefore the duty, of the landlords to get rid of them.”¹¹³ The *Illustrated London News* itself, like its colleague the *Times*, had by this time come to regard the evictions as a necessary evil which would eventually lead to a new prosperity in Ireland.

¹¹² *Illustrated London News*, 15 December 1849.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 22 December 1849.

Given the generally negative attitude to Irish landlords, the Poor Law Amendment was not likely to encounter much opposition within the government. Irish members of Parliament representing the landed interest strongly resisted it, but they had scant support in the House of Commons. There were nevertheless some politicians who had been critical of the amendment from the moment it was introduced. As the disastrous effects of its implementation were becoming evident, some of these critics openly blamed the government. Edward Horsman held that the transfer to poor law relief had been a mistake for which the government must take the blame since it was due to “prejudice created in the English mind [by] the clamours of the press as an easy solution to incompetent statesmen, who dared not go to the bottom of the subject.”¹¹⁴ George Poulett Scrope rebuked the government for making no attempt to alleviate the misery resulting from the “ferocity” of the law and warned that they would “be held responsible for it by history, by posterity – aye, and perhaps before long, by the retributive justice of God and the vengeance of a people infuriated by a barbarous oppression.”¹¹⁵ Critical voices were heard also among British Poor Law officials in Ireland who were struggling with huge problems deriving from the law, such as the difficulty of collecting poor rates and the maintenance of overcrowded workhouses. Loudest among them was that of Edward Twisleton, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner. Being in a position to observe the effects of poor law relief at first hand, he became increasingly convinced that the system would not be able to cope with the steadily growing destitution, and that the funds raised from rate collection would not be nearly sufficient to prevent continued deaths from starvation. His reservations and warnings went largely unheeded and, greatly frustrated by the refusal of the government to provide additional financial assistance, he resigned from his post in March 1849. The resignation was inevitable since, according to Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant, Twisleton thought that “the destitution here [in Ireland] is so horrible, and the indifference of the House of Commons to it so manifest, that he is an unfit agent of a policy which must be one of extermination” and that “as Chief Commissioner he is placed in a position ... which no man of honour and humanity can endure.”¹¹⁶ Lord Clarendon, who had initially been unsympathetic to the Irish and had promoted the Poor Law Amendment, eventually came to share many of Twisleton’s views. He was forced to admit that, particularly after the

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, pp. 218-19.

¹¹⁵ G.P. Scrope, *Some Notes of a Tour in England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: James Ridgway, 1849), p. 27.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 380.

second total failure of the potato in 1848, the notion that Irish property should support Irish poverty was utopian. "Whatever may be the anger of the people or Parliament in England", he wrote to Russell, "whatever may be the state of trade or credit, Ireland *cannot be left to her own resources*, they are manifestly insufficient, we are not to let the people die of starvation" [original emphasis].¹¹⁷ Clarendon's pleadings, too, fell on deaf ears.

There is, then, a great deal to be found in contemporary accounts to refute the notion that the predatory landlord as represented in nationalist writing was a purely fictitious figure. Too many observers who cannot easily be dismissed as nationalist zealots have left testimonies to the effect that he was real enough to those who became victims of his practices. As with most other aspects of the famine experience, the victims of landlordism left little behind to reveal their reactions to it. Thus their attitudes and feelings can, for the most part, be gleaned only from the writings and observations of their contemporaries. Tim P. O'Neill has argued that

[f]or many, eviction and the threat of eviction were realities and it is no surprise that the traditional picture of Irish landlordism has been dominated by stories of rackrenting and eviction. The nineteenth-century view of the horrors of eviction can only be understood by reference to the enormous number of families evicted in the Famine years and the implications for those families.¹¹⁸

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary accounts, subjective though they may be, is that they convey a sense of the implications of evictions as well as of other aspects of the famine experience, such as food exports and inadequate relief measures, for those who were most severely affected by them. These accounts, then, make way for a measure of the empathy and imagination which some critics of revisionism find regrettably lacking in that type of Famine history. In addition, they lend a significant amount of support to the suggestion that the rudiments of the genocide theory, whether prompted by a sense of betrayal by a parsimonious government, of victimization by callous landlords, or of a "conspiracy" of the two, were emerging already during the Famine years. Thus it can be argued that although the theory was developed, exploited and given political overtones by Mitchel and subsequent nationalist writers, it was based on what many contemporaries perceived as reality, and on their experiences in that reality. Insofar as these perceptions and experiences have shaped the story of the Famine, they are, and remain, a part of history. Whether or not

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 317.

¹¹⁸ O'Neill, "Famine Evictions", p. 56.

this can be labelled “myth” or “false history” may even be a moot point. Brian Murphy has argued that there exists “a two-fold level of myth: one a simple equation with error which, if removed, revealed the reality of an event.” This, then, is myth as Moody and Lyons saw it; the root of “false history.” The other is “an idea of myth as conveying ... a transcendental reality which cannot be measured in logical or historical terms. Historical accuracy has no part to play in this type of myth.”¹¹⁹ Undoubtedly, this type informs much of the nationalist story of the Famine, but it does not follow that the story therefore has no foundation in and/or bearing on reality.

3.3. Edwards and Williams’s *The Great Famine*: sanitized history?

In the Foreword to *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*, Kevin Nowlan asks: “The political commentator, the ballad singer, and the unknown maker of folk-tales have all spoken about the Great Famine, but is there more to be said?”¹²⁰ The question is rhetorical. Up until 1956, when the volume edited by R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams was published, there had been no attempt to re-write Famine history as represented by Mitchel and other nationalist writers. The Foreword makes it quite clear that, in keeping with the precepts of the “new history”, the book was a challenge to the nationalist interpretation that still largely informed public perception of the Famine in the nineteen-fifties. “In folklore and political writings”, it states,

the failure of the British government to act in a generous manner is quite understandably seen in a sinister light, but the private papers and the labours of genuinely good men tell an additional story. There was no conspiracy to destroy the Irish nation. The scale of the outlay to meet the famine and the expansion in the public relief system are in themselves impressive evidence that the state was by no means always indifferent to Irish needs[.] ... Modern research on the administrative and political backgrounds to the Great Famine reveals more clearly the limitations of men in office who were unwilling to rise or incapable of rising effectively above the economic conventions of their day and struggling with no outstanding success against a disaster that had its roots deep in Irish history. (xi)

¹¹⁹ Brian P. Murphy, “Past Events and Present Politics: Roy Foster’s ‘Modern Ireland’”, in Ó Ceallaigh (ed.), *Reconsiderations of Irish History and Culture*, pp. 72-93 [73].

¹²⁰ Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine* [1956] (1994), p.viii. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text. The Foreword is signed with the editors’ initials, but it was Nowlan who actually wrote it; see Cormac O’Gráda, “Making History in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s”, in Brady, *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 269-87 [277].

Contemporary reviews generally commended the book's questioning of the traditional interpretation. For example, Nicholas Mansergh held that "the Irish historical tradition will be enriched by studies involving reappraisal of accepted judgements in the light of new documentary and other research."¹²¹ Helen Mulvey, an American critic, remarked that the book "should do much to end the long legend that [the Famine's] worst results came from the neglect and ill intent of Englishmen."¹²² Similarly, Kitson Clark declared that the "dreadful legend [of English malignancy] in its old crude form disappears" in the book, and F.S.L. Lyons applauded "its essential achievement" of replacing "hallowed myth by ascertainable history."¹²³ In a subsequent review, Lyons suggested that, because the writers were "liberated from the bitterness of the past", the work as a whole "is mercifully free [from] the distortions which passion brings." Consequently, Lyons added, the "most striking achievement of *The Great Famine* ... is the judicious – one might say generous – temper it displays on every page."¹²⁴ Mulvey, too, commented on this aspect of the work. In her opinion, the "judgements on the policies of British statesmen" made by the various contributors were "generous."¹²⁵

It was this generosity, restraint, and unemotional exposition which the historian Brendan Bradshaw, writing in 1989, strongly objected to on the grounds that such interpretative strategies had the effect of "filtering out the trauma" of Famine history. Referring to both *The Great Famine* and Mary Daly's *The Famine in Ireland* (1986), he argued that they downplayed the catastrophic dimension of the Famine by "assuming an austere clinical tone", and that "by resort to sociological euphemism and cliometric excursi", they cerebralized and desensitized the trauma. This resulted from the adherence to a putatively objective, value-free historiography which "denies the historian recourse to value-judgements and, therefore, access to the kind of moral and emotional register necessary to respond to human tragedy."¹²⁶ Among the critics quoted above, only Nicholas Mansergh anticipated Bradshaw's critique. While com-

¹²¹ Nicholas Mansergh, Review of *The Great Famine*, in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. xi, No. 41 (March 1958), pp. 60-64 [61].

¹²² Helen Mulvey, Review of *The Great Famine*, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (January 1958), pp. 402-404 [402].

¹²³ G. Kitson Clark, Review of *The Great Famine*, in *University Review*, Vol. 1, No. 10 (1957), reprinted in *The Old Limerick Journal*, Vol. 32 (1995), pp. 174-76 [174]; F.S.L. Lyons, "The Great Famine: History and Tradition", *Irish Times*, 21 January 1957.

¹²⁴ F.S.L. Lyons, "Second Thoughts on the Famine", *Irish Writing*, No. 37 (Autumn 1957), pp. 56-58 [57-58].

¹²⁵ Mulvey, Review, p. 403.

¹²⁶ Bradshaw, "Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland", in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, pp. 201, 204.

mending the contributors' approach of entering into "the minds of those who determined policy or controlled administration" and thus surveying the scene "from above", he also conceded that this approach "has the result that the Irish people, the victims of the famine ... tend to be regarded insufficiently from within." The failure to address the question of "[w]hat happened to the people in one rural district, even in one or two villages" was considered by Mansergh to be "the principal omission" in the book.¹²⁷

Bradshaw was not the first critic to find fault with the revisionist interpretation of the Famine. In the nineteen-eighties, the revisionist claim that, given the value system of the time, British politicians and administrators did all that could be reasonably expected of them and thus could not be held responsible for the devastating consequences of the potato failure was challenged by historians like Joel Mokyr, James Donnelly, and Cormac Ó Gráda. Mokyr concluded that "[t]here is no doubt that Britain could have saved Ireland", while Donnelly maintained that "[m]any aspects of British relief policy deserve censure."¹²⁸ Ó Gráda argued that the editors of *The Great Famine* were apologists, "in essence making excuses for the attitudes of British bureaucrats and politicians"; Irish historians had "allowed the 'generosity and restraint' to run away with them." As for the book's representation of human suffering, Ó Gráda held that only the essays on the medical history of the Famine and on the folklore sources gave readers "a true sense of what the tragedy was like for those on the receiving end."¹²⁹ From the nineteen-nineties onwards, these criticisms were taken up and extended by a number of other historians, among them Christine Kinealy. She censured revisionist Famine history in general on the grounds that it tended to "view the Famine and the consequent mortality" as the inevitable result of "a long over-due Malthusian subsistence crisis", and that it "consistently avoided or denied" the issue of culpability while persistently claiming that the British government "possessed neither the practical nor the political means to either close the ports or import additional foodstuffs to Ireland." As for *The Great Famine*, she contended that it avoided a number of key issues such as "the questions of mortality and culpability" and minimized "the human dimensions of the tragedy."¹³⁰ Similarly, Paul Bew held that "there was a clear avoidance ...

¹²⁷ Mansergh, Review of *The Great Famine*, pp. 63, 64.

¹²⁸ Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved* [1983] (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 291; James S. Donnelly, "The administration of relief, 1847-51", in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland*, vol. V: *Ireland under the Union, 1, 1801-70* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 316-31 [331].

¹²⁹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine* (Manchester: University Press, 1988), pp. 79-80.

¹³⁰ Kinealy, "Beyond Revisionism", pp. 31-33; *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 12.

of harrowing scenes and distressing material which is hard to avoid for anyone who does serious work on the famine”, while Kevin Whelan criticized the book’s readiness to ascribe the causes of the Famine to overpopulation and poverty without specifying their origins, thus removing “all human agency in the creation of these.”¹³¹

But to what extent is this criticism justified? Is *The Great Famine* unduly apologetic? Does it avoid the issue of culpability and downplay the human suffering involved? The cautious and largely conciliatory tone of the Foreword gives an indication that this might be expected. Yet I would argue that a closer examination of the core chapters suggests that critics may be too harsh in some of their judgments. On the other hand, although some of the book’s contemporary reviewers did express certain criticisms and reservations, their overall assessments may have been excessively positive in some respects.

The first two chapters in the volume deal with the pre-Famine decades. In their analyses of the cause of Irish poverty, R.B. McDowell and E.R.R. Green both hold the land system responsible. McDowell sees an obvious connection between that system and the population explosion. “Given a scrap of land”, he writes, “the Irish peasant could throw up a cabin to shelter his family and grow the potatoes which formed their staple diet” (5). The fact that subdivision of land was tolerated and even encouraged by landlords who were anxious to “increase their political prestige and pull by multiplying freeholders on their estates” was, according to McDowell, a major contributor to the rapid increase in population. The peasant, too, sustained the practice of subdivision by continually asserting his “right to provide portions for his daughters and careers for his younger sons by chopping up his farm” (5). So McDowell is implying that landlords as well as tenants were responsible for the perpetuation of the practice which, by the eighteen-forties, “was being deplored on all sides” (6). Likewise, he holds both classes accountable for failing to improve agricultural methods, which were “backward” judged by “English standards.” McDowell points to the alleged “inertia, improvidence and untidiness” of the peasants as contributing factors to the lack of improvements. Yet he concedes that these characteristics were consequences of insecurity since most occupiers were tenants at will and could easily be evicted without being compensated for any improvements they may have undertaken (9). As for the landed interest, McDowell notes that it was “composed of a numerous collection of persons controlling the soil through a multiplicity of forms” (8), and as a body was therefore “deficient in the drive

¹³¹ Paul Bew, “England’s willing executioners?”, *The Spectator*, 7 June, 1997, p. 21; Kevin Whelan, “The Revisionist Debate in Ireland”, p. 199.

necessary for the achievement of an economic revolution” (7). Although there were some improving landlords, inertia was a typical trait of the majority. However, McDowell finds it “easy to understand why many landlords must have found it hard to be improving or even indulgent” since they had been used to an extravagant lifestyle which became increasingly difficult to sustain as post-war depression hit Irish agriculture with full force (8).

The conclusion which McDowell’s analysis seems to arrive at, then, is that Ireland was crippled by a ruinous, yet apparently irreversible land system which was paving the way for inevitable future disaster. What does not emerge is what part, if any, colonization had played in the genesis of that system. By contrast, Liam O’Flaherty addresses the colonial issue in his novel, and as we shall see later, so does Eugene McCabe in his fictional representation of the Famine. McDowell’s omission validates the argument of Scott Brewster and Virginia Crossman that even though “economic and demographic analyses have modified the distorted picture of Famine” produced by polemical nationalists and imperialist economists,

historians have tended to analyse the structural shortcomings of the Irish economy in the early nineteenth century without examining the causes of such weaknesses. By neutralising that disastrous history in the name of balance and objectivity, standard accounts of the 1840s have risked endorsing, rather than critiquing, the ideological construction of Ireland by imperial economists.¹³²

For readers unfamiliar with earlier Irish history, particularly that of the Plantation and the Cromwellian land settlements, the connection between colonization and the subsequent policies of landownership and estate management is not made clear by McDowell’s analysis. And his notion of inevitability also raises the question of passive injustice as posed by Judith Shklar:

Was it ... purely a misfortune that so many Irish peasants lived off a single crop, and that the land laws imposed rigid obstacles to agricultural improvement? That might raise the impossible question of historical injustice, but in this case there is every reason to recognize passive injustice. It is not only in retrospect that one sees many alternative policies that the government might have pursued. Many of its contemporary English critics spoke out in favour of change and offered suggestions for a variety of positive and plausible courses of action. The immense contempt that most Englishmen felt for the Irish is also not to be ignored.¹³³

¹³² Scott Brewster and Virginia Crossman, “Re-writing the Famine: Witnessing in crisis”, in Scott Brewster et al (eds), *Ireland in Proximity* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 42-58 [50].

¹³³ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, p. 68.

That McDowell does not consider the role passive injustice may have played in shaping the government's policies for Ireland suggests an essentially apologetic attitude.

In the second chapter of *The Great Famine*, E.E.R. Green's account of agriculture, there is at least an allusion to the colonial connection. "The subdivision produced by wartime tillage farming", Green writes,

was ultimately the responsibility of the Irish land system. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the land of Ireland had passed into the possession of a small class of Protestant landowners. Their property was based on a wholesale confiscation of Catholic estates. (91)

In order to throw some more light on the issue, Green might have added that the system had a firm basis in the English property laws: that in 1816 an act (referred to by Mitchel as "The Code of Cheap Ejectment") facilitating the eviction of tenantry was passed, and that the sub-letting acts of 1826 and 1831 penalized tenants for unauthorized subdivisions but put no restrictions on landowners. Thus proprietors could either get rid of tenants who fell into arrears and so consolidate their farms, or indulge in further subdivision in order to increase their rental incomes. Green is more critical of landlords than McDowell, noting that they invested very little capital in their estates, which they regarded as "sources of revenue rather than long-term investments." For most of them, pecuniary gain rather than the welfare of the estate and the tenantry was the main concern:

There were few landlords who did not take advantage of the competition for land to extract rack-rents which left the tenant with only the barest subsistence. By holding out penalisation rather than reward for industry, the system left the cultivator without any hope of betterment. (91)

Green also comments on landlords who let their estates, or large portions of them, to middlemen whose only interest lay in making money off their sub-tenants. But was the middleman the only one to gain in such cases? In a letter written from Cork in 1843, William Cobbett put this question to his farmworker in England, Charles Marshall. Having visited the estate of Lord Middleton, an absentee and "one of the great landowners of Ireland", Cobbett gives a graphic description of the condition of the tenants, their miserable food, their filthy "hovels", and the exorbitant rents they are forced to pay for these "holes." He then addresses Marshall directly:

So there they are, in a far worse state, Marshall, than any hog that you ever had in your life. Lord Middleton may say, that HE is not the *landlord* of these

wretched people. Ah! But his *tenant*, his *middleman*, is their landlord, and Lord Middleton gets the *more rent from him*, by enabling him to let these holes in this manner. If I were to give Mr Dean [Cobbett's farm manager] a shilling a week to squeeze you down to twelve shillings a week, who would you think was most to blame, me or Mr Dean? [original emphasis] ¹³⁴

The canny question anticipates the answer. But then again, Cobbett may have overlooked the ability of cunning and greedy middlemen and land agents to take advantage of absentee landowners. And he does not seem to have considered the possibility that long leases may have deprived landowners of the financial benefits of increasing land values.¹³⁵

Although Green partly blames poverty on subdivision, the attendant conacre system and the unassailable rights of property, he also sees potato dependence as more conducive to famine than either the land system – even though the former would seem to have been a direct consequence of the latter – or the alleged over-population. Because the whole economic structure of Irish agriculture ultimately rested on the potato, he argues, dependence on that one root was “the real danger”, whereas subdivision was “not necessarily disastrous so long as there was a balanced economy” such as existed in Ulster. In contrast, the state of most of the country, and particularly of the western seaboard, signalled impending disaster:

The proportion of the population of Ireland dependent on the potato had increased steadily, not only under the pressure of an ever-growing population but by high rents, fluctuating prices, the collapse of the domestic system of industry, the gradual decline of tillage among big farmers, and the adoption of improved methods and implements, all of which reduced employment. It had become obvious that the physical survival of the cottiers and large numbers of the farmers depended on the potato crop[.] ... The weeks between the end of the old potatoes and the digging of the new ones annually rehearsed in miniature what would take place in the event of a failure of the potato crop. (122)

Green also points out that although contemporaries recognized the economic and social problems which beset the country, the argument that it “suffered from under-production rather than over-population” was rarely heard outside Ireland. This, he explains, was due to “the English bias in favour of large-scale capitalist farming” and to the view that “the natural economy of Ireland was

¹³⁴ Knight (ed.), *Cobbett in Ireland*, pp. 124-25.

¹³⁵ In many cases, it was in fact the middleman rather than the head landlord who profited from the competition for land and the attendant rack-renting. See for example Denis Marnane, “South Tipperary on the eve of the Great Famine”, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1995, pp. 1-53 [14-15]; Mary Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1986), pp. 15-16.

grazing”, which led to the assumption that over-population constituted the entire problem, and that the problem would be solved if the surplus population could be got rid of. “It was a view”, Green states, “which encouraged a policy of drift” (117).

The criticism of the British attitude to the Irish question implicit in this statement becomes more pointed when Green comments on the role of the landlords as perceived by the government:

Responsibility in Ireland still lay with the landlords; there were few as yet to suggest that the solution of the agrarian problems should be undertaken by the state. The *ancien regime* was still accepted in Ireland, the landlord still secure in his position if only he could do something to avert approaching calamity[.] ... The state of affairs which had been largely created by the landlords, however, had passed beyond their control. (121)

So were the British to blame for expecting a rehabilitation of the Irish economy by landowners manifestly unwilling or unable to bring about such a change for the better? Were the landlords to be condemned for upholding a system which led to economic stagnation and widespread poverty, or could they be excused on the grounds that they were no longer in control of that system? Green’s comment reveals his ambivalent attitude to the question of responsibility, and yet his text as a whole conveys the impression that neither government nor landlords could be absolved. Interestingly, he seems to have reconsidered the matter by the time he wrote the chapter on the Famine in *The Course of Irish History*, which became the standard school textbook in the late nineteen-sixties. There, having described the Famine as “primarily a disaster like a flood or earthquake” for which “no one can be held responsible”, he continues:

Conditions in Ireland which had placed thousands upon thousands of people in complete dependence on the potato are another matter. Yet the historian, if he is conscientious, will have an uneasy conscience about labelling any class or individual as villains of the piece.¹³⁶

In view of this statement, Green might be justly criticized for being apologetic, but I do not think that his chapter in *The Great Famine* warrants such criticism. In spite of the discernible ambivalence regarding responsibility, there is a clear recognition of the failure of landlords and government to engage seriously and effectively with the problem of Irish poverty. Thus Green, in contrast to McDowell, seems to imply that the Famine was not inevitable.

¹³⁶ E.R.R. Green, “The Great Famine”, in T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin (eds), *The Course of Irish History* [1967] (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1994), pp. 263-74 [273].

In the third chapter of *The Great Famine*, Kevin Nowlan's account of the political background, the objective of revising nationalist writings on the Famine is unmistakable. Nowlan states his position clearly in the introduction to the essay:

The history of the great famine does not sustain a charge of deliberate cruelty and malice against those governing, but it is a chastening story of how fashions in social and economic ideas and human limitations can combine to increase the sufferings of a people. (133)

Compared with Mitchel's scathing condemnation of the government, Nowlan's assessment can certainly be deemed "generous." But although he refutes the charge of deliberate evil intentions on the part of the government there is no wholesale exoneration of them either. "From the outset", he writes,

there was a distinct refusal ... to accept the principle that the distress caused by the potato failure should be met completely from the resources of the whole United Kingdom. The unfortunate assumption was that the relief of famine victims was something closely analogous to the relief of casual paupers under the poor law code. (141)

The policies of the Russell administration receive relatively little praise from Nowlan, who maintains that they were parsimonious from the start. He argues that the Labour Rate Act was "praiseworthy" because it compelled landlords to assume part of the responsibility for the support of the people, but he also points to what he sees as its major flaw: it was not "accompanied by a policy that would have checked speculation in foodstuffs" (150). What he fails to mention is the fact that the wages paid on the public works were, in too many cases, insufficient to support a family. On the other hand, he does argue that contemporary criticism, in Ireland as well as in England, of the works was justified insofar as their unproductiveness prevented "the improvement of private estates to increase the output of agricultural produce" which, in turn, would have helped to remedy "one of the worst problems of Irish society", namely the "under-capitalised condition of agriculture" (151). Such an argument, however, seems to ignore the question of whether it was expedient to concentrate on long-term improvements rather than short-term famine relief, a question which, judging from contemporary evidence, seems to have been of the greatest importance for laymen, clergy, and even some relief officials, but apparently not for many politicians, whether British or Irish.

Mitchel's contention that Ireland died of political economy (although not specifically referred to) meets with some sympathy in Nowlan's analysis. "From the outset", he writes,

the Russell administration worked on the assumption that a well-organised retail trade in foodstuffs was established in Ireland, when, in fact, such a trade could hardly be said to exist outside the towns. The notion that the provision trade could cope with the problem reveals that disconcerting remoteness from reality in official circles which made its appearance only too often during the critical months of the famine. (149)

The result, he notes, was that people were left to the mercy of traders and speculators “who did not hesitate to exploit the plight of the peasantry”, while the relief committees in receipt of government aid were ordered “not to undersell the merchants” (153). As to the remedial effects of the soup kitchen scheme, Nowlan is more positive than Mitchel, although far from overwhelmingly enthusiastic. While noting that it undoubtedly “helped to check the worst evils of the famine” in 1847, he maintains that “it came too late to save the people from a winter of hunger and death.” His conclusion is that the scheme “warded off starvation, but that was all” (154). The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1847, which transferred the main responsibility for the relief of the destitute poor to the ratepayers of Ireland, and which Mitchel considered one of the most destructive of the “relief” measures, especially as it brought the Gregory clause in its wake, is given relatively little attention in Nowlan’s account. In view of the considerable political controversy prior to the measure’s ratification, the two pages which he devotes to it seem strikingly inadequate.¹³⁷ He notes that both Irish landlords and conservative Irish MPs were firmly opposed to it because it would allow relief outside of the workhouses. It was particularly objectionable to the landlords because the cost of this additional relief “would have to be met by a local poor rate”, and this obligation “would drive the landed class out of existence” (161-62). He does not mention that Russell himself was somewhat unsure of the positive effects of the measure, fearing that when the rate-payers realized that they would have to shoulder the whole burden of supporting poverty, the suffering of the people would be greatly intensified. Russell’s fear proved well-founded, as the collection of poor rates became increasingly difficult after the measure was passed.

But the pressure of parliamentary radicals, reinforced by British public opinion which, by 1847, had come to regard Irish landlords as “predators in

¹³⁷ Notwithstanding Nowlan’s declaration in the Foreword that *The Great Famine* “does not claim to be a definitive history of the Great Famine” (xv), the inadequate treatment of the political struggle surrounding the Poor Law Amendment must be considered a serious omission. Just how controversial the issue was is made clear by Peter Gray in his book *Famine, Land and Politics*, especially pp. 276-83.

their own country” and “greedy, clamouring supplicants at Westminster”¹³⁸, combined with the support of the O’Connellites for an extended poor law to leave Russell with no choice but to push for the adoption of the measure. Yet as a concession to the landlords and the conservatives, the so-called Gregory clause was appended to the new law in June 1847. For Nowlan, this confirmed that “the government still had a healthy respect for the rights of property and the interests of the landowners”, and he notes that the clause “proved a convenient aid in the clearances of 1847-48” (162). But he gives no examples of the havoc wrought by these clearances among cottiers and small farmers, merely observing that “the destruction of the smallest class of farmer ... got quickly under way” (165). Neither does he mention that, although the terms of the clause were slightly relaxed in the autumn of 1847 to provide workhouse relief for the dependants of evicted tenants in “extreme cases”, the “principle of the clause remained intact.”¹³⁹ This was forcefully demonstrated by the devastating effects of the mass clearances in Kilrush Poor Law union, County Clare, in 1849, which were evidently a consequence of the fact that landlords were liable for the rates on holdings valued at less than £4. In spite of these omissions, Nowlan does find reason to criticize the government because it had passed a law facilitating clearances while failing to “fulfill its promise to introduce a landlord and tenant bill” (170). But the political controversy surrounding the Rate-in-Aid Bill of 1849 is conspicuously absent from his account even though its passing clearly signalled the government’s standpoint that Ireland should no longer receive assistance from the imperial treasury. Relief of Irish distress was to become a national charge, not an imperial one. For Nowlan, then, the question of the integrity of the Union, which was raised by Irishmen as well as Englishmen during the debate over the bill, does not seem to be a subject worth pursuing. And yet the levying of additional rates meant that small farms were even less likely to survive than before, while the bill did little to remedy the desperate situation of the most distressed Poor Law unions in Ireland, which were already facing bankruptcy due to outstanding debts.¹⁴⁰

Though critical of the government’s famine policies, Nowlan rightly points out that Irish politicians had a fair share in their various failures. The split within the Repeal Association over ideological issues in the summer of 1846 left the Irish parliamentary party too weak either to win approval for such relief

¹³⁸ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 93.

¹³⁹ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 297.

¹⁴⁰ For an extended analysis of the rate-in-aid issue, see Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, pp. 243-50, 254-64.

measures as they deemed essential, or successfully to argue that the measures adopted by the government were inadequate. Internal differences of opinion further undermined their position, as demonstrated by the struggle over the Poor Law Amendment, Russell's "least attractive measure" in Nowlan's view (159). The principal failure of the Irish politicians, he maintains, was that

they proved unable or unwilling to bring home to parliament the true urgency and tragedy of the position in Ireland. The desperate plight of the people and the feebleness of the government's measures should have stirred the repeal party into purposeful activity, but they did not. (163)

This criticism could perhaps do with some modification. It was not only Parliament, but the British public at large who had to be convinced of the "position of Ireland." In 1847, public opinion was becoming increasingly hostile to Irish calls for assistance. This was partly due to a temporary financial crisis brought on by rising food prices in the summer of that year which, as Nowlan points out, pushed Irish affairs into the background. But there was also a growing irritation with the perceived Irish habit of "making a poor mouth", and a broadening agreement that British taxpayers should not be obliged to support Irish poverty. Nowlan, perhaps to his discredit, chooses to ignore the impact of such perceptions on political decision-making. Still, the point about Irish political impotence, especially from 1847 onward, did need to be made. Even Mitchel recognized this, although his criticism tended to focus mostly on the O'Connellites – perhaps to *his* discredit.

As a whole, Nowlan's view of the policies of the government and the attitude of the Irish landlords is a mixture of criticism and apologetics. He admits that the landlords "failed to fulfill their obligations" (151) and that they "displayed no particular generosity." But, he counters,

their economic position was by no means enviable. They had to bear a heavy burden of taxation, while their lands were often encumbered with mortgages and onerous rent-charges. The accumulated problems of the Irish rural economy demanded a comprehensive solution, and whatever were the faults of the Irish landowners, they alone and unaided could hardly have found, even if willing, such a solution in the midst of a social crisis. (179-80)

Although critical of the general "parsimony" of the Russell administration and its failure to bring about agricultural reforms, Nowlan cautions readers that

it is essential to realise that Lord John Russell and his colleagues were not animated by ill-will or hatred towards the Irish people. The whigs had long realised the need for reform in Ireland, but the task demanded braver hearts than could be found in the ranks of the aristocratic whigs of the mid-nine-

teenth century. They should, perhaps, have risen above the economic prejudices and beliefs of their day, but they did not. (152-53)

The last sentence in particular tends to endorse Lyons's belief that the historian's concern should be solely with the past. Lyons might of course have been entirely right in embracing such a way of thinking about the writing of history. But as Dominic La Capra has pointed out, it is an approach that easily leads to over-contextualization, cutting "history off from critical response linking past and present."¹⁴¹ Terry Eagleton has argued that revisionism as applied to Irish history "is wary of that moral anachronism ... by which one smugly projects one's own contemporary values on to the very different scenarios of the past." He concedes that "this stricture is sometimes wholly just" but that it can just as well be "a barefaced evasion."¹⁴² Nowlan's tendency to counter his own criticisms of landlords and of the government's policies with regretful excuses for their failures reveals just such a wariness. McDowell, too, betrays a reluctance to pass judgment, observing that "[c]aution[,] ... not callousness, marked the age's approach to social problems" (31), and Oliver MacDonagh in his essay on emigration makes it clear that he will not attempt "impertinent moral judgments" (335). Comments such as these overlook the fact that many contemporaries, Irish as well as British, did not hesitate to question the ethics of both government and landlords.

If we were to take it that the post-revisionist criticism of *The Great Famine* as an essentially apologetic interpretation is correct, we might perhaps expect Thomas O'Neill's chapter on the organization and administration of relief to be the most revealing, since the government's relief policies were subject to particularly harsh criticism by nationalist writers. O'Neill's account might indeed be considered "free from the hysteria" of earlier writers, as F.S.L. Lyons put it.¹⁴³ But this does not necessarily make O'Neill an apologist, and his assessment of the relief measures would seem to prove the point. Regarding the vexed question of food exports, he notes that if exportation had been prohibited during the first year of the potato blight, there would have been enough to feed the people (222). He also acknowledges that many contemporaries, and not just Irish nationalists, deplored exportation; Sir Randolph Routh, chairman of the Relief Commission, considered it "a most serious evil" (225). He goes on to provide

¹⁴¹ Dominic La Capra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 132.

¹⁴² Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop*, p. 319.

¹⁴³ Lyons, "The Great Famine: History and Tradition." I find "hysteria" too strong a word to characterize the nationalist approach to the Famine, and O'Neill's account gives the impression that he probably would have agreed.

statistics showing that, between September 1846 and July 1847, the importation of Indian corn far exceeded the exports of Irish cereals. Nevertheless, he finds it “anomalous ... that there should have been any food exported while people in the country died of starvation.” In an effort to explain why such an anomalous situation arose, O’Neill states that the British government “was subject to too many political forces” to prohibit exports, and that Russell, because committed to a free trade policy, was “unable, even if he willed it, to take the step of cutting off the Irish harvest grain from England” (244). To some readers and critics, this claim may well smack of apologetics, and O’Neill seems to be aware of this. In the conclusion to the chapter, he returns to the question of exports, noting that neither the Tories nor the Whigs could “cut off Irish supplies from England after repealing the corn laws to provide cheaper food.” Thus it was the “fetish of free trade” that had “tied their hands” (257). To label the government’s adherence to free trade an obsession suggests a decidedly critical attitude.

One reason why some readers might find O’Neill relatively lenient on the authorities is that, more often than not, his criticism is quite subtle. For example, the understocked and inefficient government food depots in the winter of 1846 elicit the following comment:

They [the depots] were not allowed to open while there were any supplies of food in the neighbourhood. Though numerous deaths by starvation occurred at Skibbereen between November 5 and December 21, the local depot did not open until after December 7, and no general permission to commence sales in all stores was issued by the treasury until December 28. (225)

Although there is no explicit censure of the policy here, O’Neill is certainly implying that it had serious flaws. There is another example in his discussion of the Russell administration’s introduction of the Labour Rate Act. “The effect of the reorganization of the public employment system”, he writes, “was to centralise control and this caused delay in undertaking works under the new act” (228). That bureaucracy was allowed to impede prompt relief at a time when the potato crop was completely destroyed and thousands had practically nothing to eat does not reflect positively on the government, and O’Neill implies as much. The same kind of criticism appears in his assessment of the soup kitchen scheme. After giving a thorough account of the administrative complexities involved in its implementation, he notes that “[t]his network of red tape caused great delay in the operation of the scheme and failure to comply with all the regulations held up food supplies” (239). There are unmistakable echoes here of Mitchel’s denunciation of the cumbersome bureaucracy which often caused delays fatal to many a family on the verge of starvation. O’Neill even refers to

the “fourteen tons of paper in regulations, forms and instructions” (238) distributed by the relief commission which Mitchel blamed for causing no end of confusion. The difference is that he apparently sees no need to voice his criticism in the scathing language so typical of Mitchel.

O'Neill finds nothing very praiseworthy in the public works scheme. He shows the unfairness of task work and the insufficiency of wages, the payment of which was often delayed. That such delays had fatal consequences is illustrated by the fate of Denis McKennedy of County Cork, who died on the roadside because he had not received any wages for a fortnight. As for the mostly unproductive nature of the works, much criticized by contemporaries, O'Neill observes that “many useless works were undertaken” and that the considerable number of roads left uncompleted after the works were shut down served as “monuments to the futile attempts of the government to meet the crisis” (230). In contrast, he argues,

the board of works deserves great credit for the manner in which it dealt with the tasks imposed on it[.] ... [I]t is doubtful if any department of state could have done more. The deficiencies in the schemes were due to government policy rather than to departmental lethargy. (232)

There seems to be only one possible inference to be made from this: the government must bear the ultimate responsibility for devising a scheme much too flawed to save a starving population. The human misery which the public works largely failed to mitigate emerges as O'Neill notes that deaths became commonplace during the winter of 1846-47. To illustrate the point, he quotes some reports from members of the Society of Friends who travelled in County Cork at the time and witnessed the awful state of the poor in Schull and Skibbereen. He also notes that inquests often returned the verdict of death by starvation and quotes two cases in which juries explicitly blamed the government for the deaths (232-34). Verdicts like these were eagerly seized upon by nationalist writers like Mitchel as they lent substance to their own criticism of the relief policies. O'Neill does not say whether or not he thinks the accusations justified – that is left for readers to decide. And yet, why would he bother to cite them if he did not see at least some merit in them?

In O'Neill's account of the effects of the Poor Law Amendment, the plight of the poor momentarily occupies centre stage. Quotes from a report by the Society of Friends and from another by a government inspector reveal the horrible conditions in overcrowded workhouses where the still relatively healthy coexisted with the sick and dying, all of them in rags, in damp and filthy quar-

ters. Thus entering the workhouse was no guarantee against death as the overcrowding “caused great danger from fever, which was rampant.” O’Neill notes that death rates reached a peak in April 1847 “when one-fortieth of the inmates in Irish workhouses died in one week” (250-51). Those who were eligible for relief outside the workhouse did not fare much better than those inside. The able-bodied had to work, mainly at stone breaking, for a minimum of eight hours a day, for which they received rations of cooked or, in most cases, raw food. Poor Law guardians, most of whom were landlords, and vice-guardians, who were appointed by the Poor Law Commission, “kept the rations as low as possible”, and in several instances, persons receiving rations died of starvation (252). O’Neill also points out that distress was greatly intensified by evictions, which escalated once the quarter acre clause was appended to the new Poor Law. As a telling example, he gives the case of Kilrush union where, between November 1847 and June 1848, “one thousand houses were levelled ... and six thousand notices to quit were served on tenants.” He concludes that the explosive increase in evictions in the country as a whole was “stimulated by the poor law system” (252-53), and readers are ultimately left in no doubt as to the misery of the poor. “The horrors of the winter of 1846 to 1847 were re-enacted in the two winters which followed”, he writes:

Persons refused relief for one reason or another were later found dead from starvation, or else, demented, attempted suicide. Burials without coffins were again common. Horse and ass flesh was eaten in counties Galway and Roscommon. Dogs fed on the corpses of the dead and the dogs, in turn, were eaten by the starving people[.] ... Girls were driven to prostitution and attacks on property were frequent [.] ... In defence of one sheep stealer, a resident magistrate gave sworn testimony that the man’s wife was so deranged with hunger that she had eaten the flesh off the legs of one of her own children dead with fever. (252)

Brief though this record of suffering is, its shocking images convey a distinct, if not full sense of what the people had to endure. In view of this, it does not seem justified to accuse O’Neill of positively avoiding distressing material.

As for the question of culpability, he finds no reason to blame the officials who were working hard to put the government’s schemes into practice. Randolph Routh, for example, who “spent twelve or fourteen hours daily” on the organization of relief,

was an able but rather unimaginative administrator who was willing to accept and operate all Trevelyan’s orders as if they were his own. That the plans were a failure was not his fault. (259)

Undoubtedly, most relief officers were hard-working and compliant with government rules and regulations, but that does not necessarily mean that they can be considered irreproachable. Judith Shklar has argued that

[p]ublic servants are ... likely to be passively unjust, being by training unwilling to step outside the rules and routines of their offices and peers, afraid to antagonize their superiors or to make themselves conspicuous.¹⁴⁴

This, she concludes, can lead to inaction and, consequently, to injustice. On these terms, it is difficult to find the majority of the officials innocent of passive injustice. But like McDowell, O'Neill fails to address the issue, and this leaves his defence of the administrators open to the charge of apologetics. In contrast, he is apparently unwilling to exculpate the government. Regarding the controversial Rate-in-Aid Bill, he remarks:

The rate-in-aid clearly showed the attitude of the government to Ireland. If the political union of 1800 were complete, the rate-in-aid should have been levied not on Ireland alone but on England, Scotland and Wales as well[,] ... but the logical conclusion of levying on Britain was not accepted. (248)

On the whole, he finds that the government failed to cope with famine conditions and that the relief measures “had no long term purpose and even in their immediate aim were not particularly successful” (258). As an indication of their failure, he notes that the census report of 1851 showed a decrease of two million in population between 1845 and the year of the census, and he concludes his chapter on a decidedly critical note. The British government, he writes,

treated the Irish crisis as if it came within the definition of ‘scarcity’ rather than ‘famine’. In all official correspondence and speeches, the more euphemistic term ‘distress’ is used, instead of ‘famine’, and the policy followed was that laid down for a minor rather than a major crisis. (259)

Some readers might consider O'Neill's criticisms too tentative in expression and tone to convey the extent of government culpability. But aside from the perhaps unwarranted exoneration of the administrators executing the various relief schemes, I cannot find any flagrant apologetics in this essay. Although Mitchel's name is never mentioned, a great deal of his criticism aimed at the government is reiterated by O'Neill, only without the vehemence and bitterness which characterizes Mitchel's style. Surely, that does not make O'Neill an apologist?

The reluctance of Irish revisionists to “pronounce in an unduly critical fashion on the limitations of previous generations”, as Mary Daly put it,¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, p. 113.

is discernible also in Oliver MacDonagh's chapter on emigration during the Famine, particularly in the part dealing with landlord-assisted emigration. In order to improve the solvency of their estates and to help their tenants to an ostensibly better life, some proprietors offered to pay their passage to Canada or the United States. Among the emigrants who arrived in Canada in 1846, many were assisted by their former landlords. They were generally well provided for and pointed out as examples of "the good which could be done by conscientious landlords."¹⁴⁶ But the situation changed for the worse in 1847, when landlords like Major Denis Mahon, Lord Palmerston and Sir Robert Gore Booth started sending out large contingents of their poorest tenants to Canada. In addition to their fares, these emigrants usually received provisions for the voyage, but on disembarkation, they were left to fend for themselves. At the time, these landlords were severely criticized for dispatching poorly clad, often diseased paupers on overcrowded, unsanitary old timber hulks unsuitable for conveying passengers, in which they were sometimes confined between decks for long periods. During the spring and summer, a total of 1,490 people were assisted in emigrating from the estate of Major Denis Mahon in County Roscommon.¹⁴⁷ John Ross Mahon, the Major's agent, stated that in addition to free passage, the emigrants were provided with "ample rations" consisting of tea, sugar, rice, oatmeal and salted fish which were to be given out to them "by weekly distribution." The people selected to go, he claimed, "expressed themselves much obliged and went cheerfully."¹⁴⁸ In August, the second of Mahon's four ships, the *Virginus*, reached the quarantine station at Grosse Île outside Quebec. Of the 496 emigrants who had boarded the ship at Liverpool, 158 had died during the crossing and 180 were ill.¹⁴⁹ As to the rest of the passengers, Dr George Douglas, the medical superintendent at Grosse Île, stated that

the few that were able to come on deck were ghastly yellow-looking spectres, unshaven and hollow-cheeked, and, without exception, the worst looking passengers I have ever seen; not more than six or eight were really healthy and able to exert themselves.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 214.

¹⁴⁷ Ciarán Reilly, *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), p. 67.

¹⁴⁸ Ross Mahon, Memorandum of the Management of the Strokestown Estate, National Library of Ireland, Pos. 928 (microfilm).

¹⁴⁹ Reilly, *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine*, p. 71.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Michael Quigley, "Grosse Ile: Canada's Famine Memorial", *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 32, no.1 (1997), pp. 20-40 [30].

The remaining Mahon emigrants fared no better as illness and death also prevailed on the *Naomi*, the *John Munn*, and on the *Erin's Queen*. Daniel Tighe, who travelled on the *Naomi*, later told his grandson that "[t]he voyage was a long nightmare of eight weeks. Drinking water ran low and food was reduced to one meal a day. Comfort and hygiene were non-existent. Typhus broke out on board." According to Ciarán Reilly, "[t]he final death toll of the Mahon emigrants was staggering: of the 1,490 who had left Strokestown over 700 died, and were buried at sea or on Grosse Île."¹⁵¹ But as MacDonagh notes, Major Mahon would "almost certainly ... have disowned any responsibility for this" (337).

During the latter half of 1847, Lord Palmerston sent out about two thousand persons from his estates in County Sligo. At the end of October, the *Lord Ashburton* arrived at Quebec with 477 passengers. Of these, 174 came from Palmerston's estates, and they were described as being almost naked.¹⁵² A few days later, the *Aeolus*, carrying tenants of both Palmerston and Robert Gore Booth reached St. John, New Brunswick. The health officer at the port reported that many of the passengers were old, while others had "broken down constitutions" or were "subjects of chronic diseases." In a message to Palmerston, the authorities of St. John expressed their regret that he or his agent had exposed a great number of distressed persons to "the severity and privations of a New Brunswick winter ... unprovided with the common means of support ... and almost in a state of nudity."¹⁵³ The Canadian authorities were convinced that these landlords were sending out their most destitute tenants less from any concern for their welfare than from their own desire to rid their estates of surplus population, and accused them of "barbarity ... for the paltry purpose of freeing themselves from the natural and just burden to support and provide for their poor." The Emigration Commission in London also reprimanded the landlords, stating that

an emigrant requires even more than the average of health and strength to succeed, and ... when they are assisted to go, it is equally unjust to the British provinces, and cruel to the poor persons themselves, to send out those who are totally unable to live by their own industry.¹⁵⁴

The landlords' position on the matter was exemplified by Gore Booth who held that, because of overpopulation, "emigration was the only humane method of

¹⁵¹ Reilly, *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine*, p. 73.

¹⁵² Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pp. 228-29.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Gerard Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth and his landed estate in County Sligo, 1814-1876* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. 42; Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 229.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth*, pp. 43-44.

putting properties in Ireland on a satisfactory footing” and that “it was not right to evict and turn people out on the world.”¹⁵⁵ That many emigrants actually were so turned out since they ended up begging on the streets of Canadian towns or became charges on Canadian almshouses was apparently not part of the equation.

In his discussion of landlord-assisted emigration, MacDonagh raises the question of whether the practice was justified. He notes that proprietors could claim that emigration “set many districts on their feet again, and that, all things considered, the emigrants ... had much reason to be grateful.” On the other hand, he argues, “even ‘undertaking’ emigration sometimes involves human callousness”, and “an offer of ‘assisted emigration’ often meant no more than eviction and a small sum which could not possibly have paid the fare” (335-36). This raises the further question of the allegedly non-compulsory nature of assisted emigration. In 1848, Gore Booth told the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland that he “never compelled any individual” to emigrate and that people are “very willing to emigrate when absolutely obliged to quit the land.” Exactly what the term “obliged” entails in this context is not specified. He also said that people sometimes took a “dislike” to moving, but “when forced to do so by circumstances they preferred emigration to the holding of an indifferent farm.” It is worth noting that Gore Booth was responding to questions specifically confined to “a period anterior to the failure of the potato crop.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Palmerston’s agent Joseph Kincaid told the Devon Commission that “Palmerston’s distinct orders were, that no man should be dispossessed unless he chose to go.”¹⁵⁷ The Commission was collecting evidence between 1843 and 1844. Thus Kincaid’s statement relates to pre-Famine emigration from the Palmerston estate. But would destitute tenants unable to pay rent still have had that choice in 1847? The same question would have to be asked regarding Gore Booth’s tenants. In MacDonagh’s opinion, “anyone with common sense could answer that the cottier’s ‘choice’ was often a complete illusion.” Landlords would of course claim that their emigration schemes were entirely voluntary, but

[a] poor tenant, ringed about by bailiffs and destitution, unable to pay his rent and struggling to keep his family alive, was in no position to refuse

¹⁵⁵ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pp. 227-28.

¹⁵⁶ House of Lords, *Second Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland* (London: House of Commons, 1848), p. 259.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Desmond Norton, *Landlords, Tenants, Famine* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), p. 49.

even a penniless landing on a strange shore. He had neither legal rights nor bargaining power. (336)

MacDonagh observes that it is difficult to determine the attitude of cottiers and smallholders who accepted emigration. Were they reluctant to leave, or did they go “cheerfully”, as Major Mahon’s agent claimed? The impression of many contemporary observers was that, especially from early 1847 onwards, they were clamouring to go. Already in December 1846, the *Cork Examiner* wrote about “hundreds frantically rushing from their home and country, not with the idea of making fortunes in other lands, but to fly from a scene of suffering and death.”¹⁵⁸ Jonathan Pim of the Society of Friends reported that the emigrants expressed “joy at their escape, as if from a doomed land”, and William Balch wrote that they “flee like captives escaped from cruel bondage.”¹⁵⁹ MacDonagh remarks that the spring emigration of 1847 “bore all the marks of panic and hysteria”, and that it seemed more like “a flight of refugees, than an emigration as ordinarily understood” (321). Under such circumstances, can it be assumed that emigrants, even if they were “assisted”, went gladly? Eugene McCabe, too, raises this question in his *Tales from the Poorhouse* which I analyse in Chapter 6.

The historian Kerby Miller has pointed out that the assertions of proprietors and agents as to their good intentions and the willingness of their tenants to leave should not be taken at face value even though “statements by ‘assisted’ emigrants sometimes corroborated those of their benefactors.” Miller shows that there was still traditional resistance to emigration, and that many who left did so “reluctantly, not joyfully.”¹⁶⁰ MacDonagh, too, concedes the point, taking the case of eviction and emigration from the Crown estate of Ballykilcline, County Roscommon, as an example. The first offer of assisted emigration was accepted by many of the tenants, but resistance grew while they were getting ready to depart, and people kept changing their minds. Under the threat of eviction without compensation in lieu of passage, two hundred were eventually induced to go. Faced with imminent eviction, the remaining twenty-five families bombarded the Crown authorities with petitions, begging to be allowed to die “in the land of their forefathers and their birth” (337). But the agent was adamant that the estate had to be completely cleared in order to make way for large, profitable farms, and the petitions

¹⁵⁸ Killen, *The Famine Decade*, p. 83.

¹⁵⁹ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 255; Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁰ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pp. 302-03.

were ignored.¹⁶¹ MacDonagh admits that the case of Ballykilcline is but a “slight” piece of evidence, and yet

it does seem to bear out what we should have thought most probable in any case: that many of the tenants, who accepted emigration, did so with great reluctance; and that landlords could, and did, bring pressure of a questionable sort to bear upon them. For here the crown behaved, by and large, as any ordinary landlord would have done. (338)

In spite of such concessions, MacDonagh seems reluctant to blame the landlords. Referring to the scandal which culminated with the arrival of the *Aeolus*, he argues that the Canadian emigration committee launched a “fierce and inaccurate attack upon Irish ‘landlordism’ in general, and Palmerston’s ‘human cargoes’ in particular” (339). He does not explain in what respect this “attack” was “inaccurate.” It is of course possible that the Canadian authorities were exaggerating the misery of the emigrants, but both Gore Booth and Kincaid might just as well have exaggerated the favourable conditions under which these people were sent out. On the other hand, although they defended themselves against the Canadian charges, neither Gore Booth nor Kincaid made any attempt to deny that they had sent out people who were destitute and unlikely to be able to fend for themselves once they arrived. In the end, MacDonagh suggests, “the only possible defence was that the emigration was essential for the survival of their estates, and that their tenants could not possibly be worse off than they were at home” (339). The argument that the chief motive for the emigration was the welfare of the tenants is dismissed by MacDonagh as “manifestly absurd.” And yet he concludes that

there is no general moral judgement to be passed. Landlords stand condemned for specific acts of inhumanity, dishonesty and irresponsibility; but not, in justice, for a point of view and tangle of economic difficulty, which, in nine cases out of ten, they had merely had the misfortune to inherit. (340)

Recent studies of assisted emigration tend to support such a view.¹⁶² The fact that these landlords actually did something for their tenants arguably puts them in a positive light, especially in comparison with those of their peers who simply evicted. But can landlords be exculpated for treating their tenants as “economic ciphers”, as MacDonagh himself puts it, on the plea of inherited

¹⁶¹ For a detailed account of the Ballykilcline estate, see Robert Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁶² Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth*, pp. 33-48; Norton, *Landlords, Tenants, Famine*, pp. 49-56; Tyler Anbinder, “Lord Palmerston and the Irish Famine Emigration”, *Historical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2001), pp. 441-69.

views? He seems to think so, or at least he finds that it is not the business of historians to question such attitudes. On Terry Eagleton's view, this might be seen as an example of "barefaced evasion." In his assessment of assisted emigration, MacDonagh is at pains to point out the mistakes for which landlords might be reproached and to give an impression of the attitude of the emigrants. But he does end up absolving landlords of the *overall* responsibility for their tenants. This would seem to contradict his own statement that the question of whether assisted emigration was justified "cannot be answered directly by the historian" (335). I would argue that MacDonagh does answer it, and that he finds assisted emigration justified. Unfortunately, such a view overlooks that of a great many contemporaries, and not only that of nationalists, while also leaving MacDonagh's interpretation open to post-revisionist claims that the human dimension of the Famine was diminished in revisionist accounts.

I find it difficult to conclude that, as a whole, *The Great Famine* is unduly apologetic. Some readers might feel that, in the effort to present a balanced view of the Famine, the contributors are too lenient on the British government. But as Cormac Ó Gráda has suggested, "[a]ttempts at balance always risk being interpreted as making excuses."¹⁶³ And yet the charge that the book ultimately evades the issue of responsibility is to some extent justified since *The Great Famine* does not convincingly answer the question of why the richest empire on earth failed to prevent the terrible consequences of famine in Ireland, a country which was, in effect, part of that empire since the Act of Union. That question involves the key issue of government expenditure. According to Peter Gray, between 1845 and 1850 Treasury outlay on Famine relief amounted to £8,100,000, "of which just over half was in loans to be repaid by Ireland." When the remaining debts were cancelled in 1853, "the net amount spent was some £7,000,000, representing less than half of one per cent of the British GNP over five years." Gray also notes that some £8,500,000 were raised in Ireland through poor rates and landlord borrowings, "straining the country's resources to their limit."¹⁶⁴ Kevin Nowlan considers the sum of seven million pounds "enormous" and finds that "[w]e are sometimes apt to overlook the scale of the outlay" while "contemporaries were not so unmindful" (177). Many contemporaries did see the Treasury grants as a generous bounty for which the Irish should be grateful, but Nowlan ignores the fact that others saw them in quite a different light. In 1848, exasperated by the government's reluctance to vote additional funds for relief, the Marquess of Sligo wrote to the Lord Lieutenant:

¹⁶³ Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, p. 82.

¹⁶⁴ Gray, *The Irish Famine*, pp. 94-95.

[M]oney can be got if the nation wills it, and would be forthcoming if the necessity of it were proved either for foreign war or internal famine. It surely is equally the office of the Executive to protect from the latter as from the former and deliberately to allow a man innocent of all crime to perish for economy's sake would amount almost to an abdication of government.¹⁶⁵

In 1849, Edward Twisleton expressed his disgust at the Treasury's refusal to provide "the comparatively trifling sum with which it is possible for this country to spare itself the deep disgrace of permitting any of our miserable fellow subjects ... to die of starvation." In his opinion, it would be quite possible to prevent further deaths "by the advance of a few hundred pounds, say a small part of the expense of the Coffre War."¹⁶⁶ In view of opinions such as these, the assessment of the scale of the outlay made in the Foreword of *The Great Famine* as "impressive" seems at best ill-considered.

In May 1849, Lord John Russell stated that the government could do nothing more to prevent starvation in Ireland. They did not dare ask Parliament for further grants, he claimed, because the English people "will not consent to give any more." This elicited an angry response from the editors of the *Liverpool Journal*. They castigated England and the legislature for "accepting the fact that hundreds die daily of want in Ireland" and for implying that it was "proper and fitting" that they should do so. "Death is their destiny", they wrote,

and the wealthiest people on earth ... amidst an abundance that millions deem superfluous, and in a age which boasts of unequalled charity and the purest of piety, permits thousands of their fellow-creatures – their neighbours – to die on the public highways, with fields of plenty beyond either hedge – for want of food[.] ... The kingdom appears ignorant of the character of its own acts – unconscious of the great national crime it is committing[.] ... In the total absence of war – of riot – of disorder – in a season of profound peace – to permit tens of thousands to perish for want to that relief which we are well able to afford, will hardly escape the censure of posterity.¹⁶⁷

But as *The Great Famine* in the final analysis demonstrates, posterity is not always inclined to be as censorious as some contemporaries. Melissa Fegan has suggested that Famine historians "seem abnormally concerned with anachronisms."¹⁶⁸ Still, for the practitioners of the "new history", steering clear of anachronism was hardly abnormal given the precept that history should be concerned with the past only. And yet an evaluation of government responsibility need not

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 328.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 263.

¹⁶⁷ *Liverpool Journal*, 2 June 1849, quoted in de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, pp. 139-40.

¹⁶⁸ Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine*, p. 21.

involve “impertinent moral judgements.” As Wolfgang Mommsen has argued, the historian should

duly take the perspectives of contemporaries into consideration so as to create the preconditions for a proper understanding of the subjective motivations of the historical actors. The next step is to explain the events in question from a generalized, societal perspective, where evaluative perspectives and moral criteria enter into one’s historical judgement.¹⁶⁹

But when the opinions of the most critical contemporaries are under-represented, the evaluative perspective becomes lopsided. If the contributors to *The Great Famine* had paid more attention to those opinions, they just might have found the moral criteria needed to offer a more conclusive, perhaps even a more objective, assessment of government responsibility. Unquestionably, they succeed in convincingly disproving the genocide theory. Yet as Daltún Ó Ceallaigh has pointed out, “[a]scribing culpability is not dependent on establishing simplistic conspiracy.”¹⁷⁰

The allegation of recent critics that *The Great Famine* downplays or glosses over the horrors of the Famine tragedy is hard to refute unreservedly. As noted earlier, O’Neill does not avoid “distressing material” altogether, yet his relatively brief account of the suffering endured by the people supports Nicholas Mansergh’s opinion that the victims appear insufficiently regarded from within. The chapters by Nowlan, MacDonagh and William MacArthur further validate Mansergh’s appraisal. Although Nowlan discusses the Labour Rate Act, the Amended Poor Law and the Gregory clause, he does not elaborate on the consequences of these measures for the starving population. MacDonagh’s vindication of landlord-assisted emigration involves an implicit endeavour to tone down the image of the so-called coffin ships which occupied a prominent position in nationalist history as well as in folklore and popular memory. As a result, contemporary descriptions of the appalling conditions on ships like the *Elizabeth and Sarah* included in MacDonagh’s chapter tend to lose their force when he suggests that passengers “brought much of their misery upon themselves by their own ignorance and uncleanly habits”, by their “fatal apathy” and their “resignation” (364-65). Even for an account which seeks to present a balanced view, such an attitude to starving and diseased people crowded into ships manifestly unfit for carrying passengers seems both cynical and sugges-

¹⁶⁹ Mommsen, “Moral Commitment and Scholarly Detachment”, in Leerssen and Rigney (eds), *Historians and Social Values*, p. 45.

¹⁷⁰ Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, “Reconsiderations”, in idem (ed.), *Reconsiderations of Irish History and Culture*, pp. 5-26 [13].

tive of a certain lack of empathy. Although the horrors of the coffin ships may have been overemphasized in nationalist history, there can hardly be any doubt that, regardless of who or what caused them, they were very real to those who had to suffer them.

In his review of *The Great Famine*, Lyons commended William MacArthur for “achieving even greater clinical detachment” than the rest of the contributors in his chapter on the medical history of the Famine.¹⁷¹ This detachment means that MacArthur is mainly concerned with facts about the various diseases afflicting the population and with figures relating to the mortality resulting from them. Consequently, the point of view of the medical practitioner supersedes that of the victims. This is not to say that the victims are ignored. MacArthur refers to several contemporaries who described the suffering of the sick and starving and how that suffering was exacerbated by their confinement to overcrowded fever hospitals, workhouses and gaols. Yet there are omissions in his account which suggest a certain “filtering out of the trauma”, as Bradshaw put it. For example, the effects of undernourishment are amply described in terms of their physical manifestations, but there is no consideration of how prolonged hunger might have affected people mentally. Already in 1848, Dr Daniel Donovan published articles in the *Dublin Medical Press* based on his work among the starving in Skibbereen. His observations on “the morbid effects of insufficient nourishment” included the victims’ own descriptions of hunger as well as examples of mental derangement and “imbecility” and of insensitivity to the suffering of others.¹⁷² Surely, such aspects should warrant a closer examination in a modern medical history of the Famine.

According to Kathleen Nutt, the problem of trauma cannot be ignored in history writing. She proposes that historians should emphasize

not only the world of national politics, but also the lives of those who did not have the opportunity to play a leading part. The lives of all the victims of history ... should be incorporated into the mainstream of critical history.¹⁷³

The contributors to *The Great Famine* do not quite manage to meet these stipulations. Because its core chapters deal with the point of view of administrators, politicians and medical practitioners, the lives of the victims are made to appear of secondary importance. The disparity in emphasis creates an imbalance

¹⁷¹ Lyons, “The Great Famine: History and Tradition”, p. 5.

¹⁷² Laurence M. Geary, “What people died of during the Famine”, in Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150*, pp. 95-111 [97-98].

¹⁷³ Kathleen Nutt, “Irish identity and the writing of Irish history”, *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1994), pp. 160-72 [171].

which suggests that the writers are reluctant to engage fully with the traumatic implications of the famine experience. Roger McHugh's survey of Famine folklore goes some way to redressing this imbalance by attempting to convey "the truth, heard from afar, of the men and women who were caught up, uncomprehending and frantic, in [the] disaster" (436). As such, it illuminates some aspects of the experience which are overlooked or scantily represented in the preceding chapters. For example, folklore suggests that relief food was often of bad quality, that there was a great deal of dishonesty involved in its distribution, and that many people felt humiliated when forced to resort to the charity of the soup kitchens. People's widespread perception of workhouses and fever hospitals as death's waiting-rooms is much emphasized, and there are numerous stories of disease and death wiping out whole villages, of the dead often being scantily buried or not at all, and of mass burials in "fever pits" adjacent to workhouses and hospitals. Perhaps most significantly, folklore conveys a sense of cultural loss as the psychological changes brought on by starvation and the struggle to survive destroyed the communal spirit which had defined most pre-Famine peasant communities along the western seaboard from Donegal to Cork. As one informant to the Folklore Commission put it, "[t]he famine killed everything" (435).

To what, then, might the relative paucity of "distressing material" in *The Great Famine* be attributed? One obvious reason, as Cormac Ó Gráda points out in his introduction to the 1994 edition, is that "the contributors were reacting to the melodramatic discourse of populist-nationalist accounts" (xxiv). That still does not explain the meagre references to contemporary testimonies, which were by no means always melodramatic. Yet their subjectivity and their affective power might have rendered them "unsuitable" in a history book which aimed at being objective and free of emotional excess. Another possible reason involves the problem of representation. As noted earlier, that problem was recognized already by contemporary observers who agonized over the perceived inadequacy of language to describe what they had seen. That still did not keep them from attempting representations of the effects of starvation and disease on the victims. People like William Bennett, Richard Webb, William Forster and James Hack Tuke came to Ireland to "obtain trustworthy information as to the real state of the more remote districts" and to devise "the best means of affording relief."¹⁷⁴ In short, they were all on fact-finding missions. Yet their analyses of the Irish land system, agricultural practices, landlordism, the pub-

¹⁷⁴ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 38.

lic works, the Poor Law and the problems of organizing relief are interspersed with descriptions of the desperate situation of the poor, of starvation, disease and death. For them, the fact of human suffering was as important as any other facts pertaining to the Famine, and it demanded representation, however “inadequate.” Stuart McLean has suggested that evasion of the fact of death stems from the apparently “ungraspable” event of famine. “[T]he terrors it evokes”, he writes,

may be precisely what the historian struggles to hold at bay, substituting the academic protocols of analysis and explanation for the encounter with death that nonetheless provides the unspoken charter for the historiographical enterprise.¹⁷⁵

But when analytic and explanatory narrative for some reason or other cannot, or will not, accommodate victims, the central realities of famine – hunger, disease and, ultimately, death – are diminished, and what R. Dudley Edwards himself saw as the “danger of dehydrated history” becomes imminent.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Stuart McLean, *The Event and Its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 14.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Ó Gráda, “Making History in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s”, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, p. 286.

4. 'THE HISTORY OF THE POOR IS THE HISTORY OF IRELAND': Walter Macken's *The Silent People*

R.D. Edwards made the remark about the “danger of dehydrated history” in his diary in September 1952 while work on *The Great Famine* was in progress. A few days earlier, he had written that he was feeling “a little depressed at the dulling effects of academic discipline” and that the fictions of “[William] Carleton and Liam O’Flaherty have at least an equal right to be taken for history as such.”¹ A decade later, Edwards might have included Walter Macken (1915-1967) in this assessment of fiction as history. *The Silent People* appeared in 1962 as the second part of a trilogy of historical novels which Macken himself apparently intended to be taken for history as such.² As James Cahalan has remarked, each of the three novels “is introduced by a ‘Historical Note’ that is both expository and didactic [,] ... informing readers of key historical facts.” Cahalan also suggests that the notes prepare readers for “an Irish nationalist interpretation of the facts.”³ In one of the introductory notes to *The Silent People*, Macken writes that although the Irish House of Commons was a sectarian and unrepresentative assembly, “[it] was still an Irish voice” which was “destroyed by William Pitt, who succeeded in having the Act of Union passed in 1800.” He also notes the relatively low number of Irish representatives in the United Kingdom Parliament and points out that no Catholic could be elected a member “although four-fifths of the Irish nation were of that faith.” The note ends with a reference to Daniel O’Connell who, after Catholic Emancipation in 1829, devoted the rest of his life “to the Repeal of the Act of Union, hoping once again to see an Irish Parliament sitting in Dublin.”⁴ All of this would certainly suggest that Macken is about to serve up a “Story of Ireland”- type vision of Irish history in which England, the destroyer of the Irish voice, and the Union that England forced through are perceived as responsible for all of Ireland’s ills. As such, the novel could be expected to contradict the revisionist interpretation of Edwards and Williams, but does it do so? And if not, then what exactly does

¹ Quoted in Ó Gráda, “Making History in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s”, in Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History*, p. 285.

² The first part, *Seek the Fair Land* (1959) deals with the Cromwellian era of the 1650’s, while the third, *The Scorching Wind* (1964) spans the years from the Easter Rising in 1916 through the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21) and the Civil War (1922-23).

³ Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 160.

⁴ Walter Macken, *The Silent People* [1962] (London: Pan Books, 1988), p. 6. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

the “nationalist representation” for which Macken supposedly prepares readers entail?

4.1. ‘The most oppressed people in Europe’

The Silent People spans a period from 1826 through the first half of 1847. The time frame allows Macken to picture Irish life in the pre-Famine period, and this backward look forms the basis of his attempt to put the Famine into perspective. As in O’Flaherty’s *Famine*, the focus is on the common people, the “silent people” of the title, who have no voice in the greater scheme of things. Macken’s hero, Dualta Duane, is the embodiment of these people. As the novel opens, the innocent, naïve seventeen-year old Dualta becomes the victim of the senseless violence and subsequent injustice which seem to be the order of the day. Fascinated by a puppet show at the local fair, Dualta happens to stand in the way of “the Half-Sir”, the son of the local landlord who, hung-over and irritated, strikes him across the face with his whip. Enraged, Dualta throws him from his horse in a misguided attempt to preserve his dignity, an action which proves fatal for himself as well as for his uncle Marcus, with whom he lives, having lost his parents and siblings in the famine of 1817. Dualta insists that he will be protected by law since it was the Half-Sir who hit him first, but Marcus knows better:

There is law. Maybe it’s good law, I don’t know. But you cannot interpret it. I cannot. They are the people who say what the law means. They are the magistrates. They are the ones who say what’s right. Right is on their side[.] ... They will beat you within an inch of your life, and then they will transport what’s left of you for seven years to Australia. (18)

Marcus also knows that “they” will not let him go unpunished for what his nephew has done, that he will be driven from his home: “I built this house”, he tells Dualta,

but it isn’t mine. I grow potatoes in a two-rood field, but it isn’t mine[.] ... I have no option. If I don’t go I will be put [out]. If they can’t get at you, they will get at me. One must accept these things when one can’t fight them[.] ... We have no weapons, except patience and sufferance, and talk about tomorrow. (18)

Marcus’s situation epitomizes that of the pre-Famine small farmers, cottiers and landless labourers. The circumstances under which they had to eke out a meagre living was described by John Stuart Mill in 1825. The inhabitants of Ireland, he wrote,

are the poorest and the most oppressed people in Europe[.] ... [W]hatever the end of government in Ireland may be, it at any rate is *not* the protection

of the weak against the strong[.] ... [T]he Irish peasant is at the mercy, not only of a whole series of landlords, from the proprietor of the soil down to the lowest middleman ... [but also] vestries and grand juries[.] ... [A]gainst undue demands of these persons he has no remedy[.] ... [T]here is no law, no administration of justice for *him* [original emphasis].⁵

Having escaped the vengeful Half-Sir and his cronies, Dualta heads south in search of work. Along the way, the truth of much that Marcus said is brought home to him. In Galway town, he and his friends watch a group of forty-shilling freeholders being marched to the polling booths to vote for their landlord's candidate. Dualta feels sorry for these men who are "neither free nor holding anything" and who have to do what they are told or face possible eviction. Their sole purpose, Dualta knows, is to "vote in the right way", thus increasing their landlord's "chances for patronage in a sea of corruption" (39). That the forty-shilling franchise entailed abuse and corruption, and that the vote of the tenant was assumed to be the property of the landlord, was confirmed by many contemporary observers, among them John Stuart Mill, who described the freeholders as "the tools of their landlords":

Droves of electors, driven to the poll often without knowing, till they reached the spot, the name of the candidate whom they are to vote for; themselves the property of their landlord, a sort of live stock upon the estate, whom nobody thinks of canvassing, and who would probably stare on being told that the franchise (as it is ironically called) was regarded as a privilege to themselves.⁶

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville interviewed an Irish lawyer who asserted that "the tenant-farmer elector always voted according to the interest of his landlord" and that therefore, the landlord had "a very great political motive" to sub-divide his estate into smaller farms "in order to increase the number of electors who were loyal to him."⁷ William Carleton held that the franchise led to "the fraudulent sub-division of small holdings", to "bribery, perjury and corruption" and to the "shameful prostitution of [the tenants'] morals and comfort, for the purposes of political ambition or personal aggrandisement."⁸

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Ireland* [1825], in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume 6: Essays on England, Ireland and the Empire*, ed. John Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 66-67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁷ Emmet Larkin (ed. and transl.), *Alexis deTocqueville's Journey in Ireland, July-August, 1835* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990), p. 28.

⁸ William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, volume 1 [1843] (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), pp. xx-xxi.

Dualta's initial sympathy for the freeholders turns into contempt as his recalcitrant bent comes to the fore under the influence of alcohol. He seems to forget that these tenants are totally dependent on the goodwill of their landlord for their holdings. "Look at those stupid people", he broods, "walking into those stupid booths and voting for men they never heard of. Is this the action of men, or is it the action of slaves?" As he sees it, the representative chosen by these "simple people" will go to "the faraway dreamland of London" only to "bring in more Coercion Acts, or something else that would bind [the people] deeper to their chains" (43). Only a few years later, Dualta himself is faced with the dilemma of these coerced electors: vote as ordered or risk dispossession. Having obtained the lease of an eight-acre farm in County Clare, he is now a freeholder expected to vote for the landlord's candidate in the 1828 election. But when he learns that Daniel O'Connell is going to stand against the sitting MP, he knows that he cannot succumb to orders like the "slaves" in Galway did. "Now I know how they felt", he tells Father Finucane: "I will not feel that way" (191). And yet now, he understands their fear because he feels it himself:

It's easy to be free when you have nothing to lose[.] ... I have a lease ... with a lot of small writing in it[.] ... [T]he landlords interpret the law. They are the judge and jury. They can read the writing whatever way suits them. I think of this and I am afraid. Most men will be. (190)

Watching the freeholders in Galway, the younger Dualta does not yet understand the fear which can determine the actions of a man who has everything to lose. He himself seems to feel that he has nothing to lose since he has been forced to flee from home. Consequently, his rebellious tendencies re-surface when, standing for hire together with his friend Paidi in an unnamed southern town, his pride is wounded again by a "gentleman" who reminds him of the "Half-Sir" at home. Immediately after this incident, he is hired by Cuan McCarthy, leader of the local secret agrarian society, who offers him "opportunities to fight oppression" (52). As self-appointed champions of the oppressed, Cuan and his gang target the local landlord, his bailiff, and the "land grabbers" who dare bid for the land of evicted tenants. Dualta's first task is to write threatening letters to those who, in one way or another, exploit small farmers, cottiers and labourers. In one of these letters, a farmer named Tooley is advised to withdraw his bid for the land of a tenant facing eviction, or he will suffer the consequences. In another, a bailiff is told to leave his post, or else he "will sleep in the Embrace of the Briars." The thought of Hanley, the bailiff, in the briar-bed makes Dualta smile since he thinks that "the threat of it was sufficient" and would

never be carried out. Naïvely, he considers the writing of threatening letters “a game” in which he loves to indulge (53-54). But before long, he realizes that, rather than playing games, Cuan’s gang practise what might be described as terrorism and that the targets of their threats and punitive actions are not only the landlord and his hirelings, but also small tenant farmers like Tooley, whose five-acre plot of land is insufficient to support his large family.

In pre-Famine Ireland, agrarian secret societies operated under a number of different names, but as James Donnelly has noted, “[t]he general public usually thought of the members ... simply as Whiteboys”,⁹ the name deriving from the white shirts they wore. Their main purpose was to protect the interests of the small farmers and cottiers against rack-renting and evicting landlords and estate agents, but they also targeted the “land grabbers” who tried to obtain the holdings of evicted tenants. If threatening letters did not have the desired effect, they resorted to the burning of hayricks and houses, the maiming of cattle, beatings, and even murder. Their activities were condemned by the upper and middle classes, by the Catholic Church, and by Daniel O’Connell, who objected to all forms of violent protest or resistance. Ann Coleman has noted that the societies were “feared and distrusted” and that “their achievements, if any”, were considered “few and dearly bought.”¹⁰ Thus Henry David Inglis, travelling in Ireland in 1834, heard “from every respectable quarter ... but one opinion as to the necessity of a Coercion Bill.”¹¹ Yet rather than conclude, as Sir Robert Peel did, that the Irish have “a natural predilection for outrage and a lawless life”,¹² many contemporary commentators recognized the underlying causes of agrarian discontent and violence. In a pamphlet published in 1834, George Poulett Scrope put the blame squarely on the laws which guaranteed the absolute power of landlords. “It is impossible”, he wrote,

to have any doubts as to the real cause of the insurrectionary spirit and agrarian outrages of the Irish peasantry. They are the struggles of an oppressed starving people for existence! They are the rude efforts at obtaining a sort of savage self-established justice[.] ... They are the natural and necessary results of a state of law which allows the landlords of a country at one time to encourage an excessive growth of population on their estates, and at another, when caprice seizes them, to dispossess all this population, and turn them out on the highways without food or shelter.¹³

⁹ Donnelly, *Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Ann Coleman, *Riotous Roscommon* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), p. 31.

¹¹ Henry D. Inglis, *A Journey Throughout Ireland, during the Spring, Summer, and Autumn of 1834* (London: Whittaker & Co, 1836), p. 66.

¹² Quoted in R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), p. 294.

¹³ Quoted in Curtis, *Nothing but the Same Old Story*, p. 50.

John Stuart Mill, too, considered landlordism the chief malady of Ireland and argued that the disaffection among the lower orders of Irish society was not to be wondered at:

The causes of Irish disaffection are many and various; the greatest of them being, that several millions of the Irish people having nothing to support them but potatoes and for two or three months of every year not enough of those[,] ... all the remainder of what the land produces, be that remainder great or small, being taken, under the name of rent, by about eight thousand persons. If these several millions of Irish are dissatisfied under this kind of arrangement, it must be acknowledged that they have something to be dissatisfied with.¹⁴

The French political and social commentator Gustave de Beaumont, who toured Ireland in 1835, saw the activities of agrarian secret societies as manifestations of a “social war” being waged “between the rich and the poor, between the master and the slave, between the proprietor and the cultivator.” What had provoked this war, he claimed, was “the selfishness of the rich” that had been “carried to an excess which necessarily drove the poor to revolt.” He concluded that Irishmen’s “habits of outrage and insurrection” did not derive from some putative natural inclination, but from “the influence of tyranny which drove them into open opposition to the law.”¹⁵

Although these commentators recognized and seemed to understand the motives behind agrarian unrest, they deplored the violence employed by Whiteboys and other such organizations. Macken’s representation of Cuan McCarthy’s gang takes a similar point of view. Cuan insists that “the system” must be resisted and that their methods are wholly justified, while Dualta, after some initial vacillation, finds himself increasingly opposed to their *modus operandi*. In spite of the fact that both he and his uncle Marcus have been victimized by “the system”, he does not yet seem to grasp the full ramifications of it. When Morogh Ryan and his family are about to be evicted, Dualta remarks that Ryan is “a weak man” who “was bound to go to the wall some day.” Annoyed by what he apparently considers a simplistic view of the matter, Cuan lectures Dualta:

Whose fault? Because he is weak all the more reason that he should find true justice. A strong man can look after himself[.] ... You are young. You dismiss men like straws. It’s not the men. It’s the system. Morogh has five children.

¹⁴ Mill, *What is to be done with Ireland?* [1848?], in *Collected Works*, volume 6, p. 501.

¹⁵ Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Social, Political and Religious* [1839], ed. and trans. W.C. Taylor (Cambridge, MA. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 150-51, 199.

What will become of them? He will go into a town and at the outskirts he will build a wretched shelter. He will beg and look for odd jobs and he will scour rubbish-heaps. Unless God is better to him than now, he will have to sell the small bodies of his daughters for a stone of potatoes. Yes, he is a weak man, is Morogh.

Dualta does not argue with Cuan, but he still thinks that Ryan is ultimately responsible for his own downfall, partly because he is a “lazy man.” He knows that Ryan has taken land at a very high price and thinks that “he should never have bid for what he couldn’t afford” (56). What he does not seem to understand is that the fierce competition for land is forcing many men into Ryan’s position since access to land is a matter of life or death. Gustave de Beaumont, for one, saw this dilemma quite clearly. “The Irish peasant”, he wrote,

must have an acre or half an acre of ground, or die; he must have it at any price, or on any conditions, however severe they may be. The reasonable rent of this acre would be four pounds; I offer the landlord double; another offers ten pounds; I raise my bidding to twenty; the land is adjudged to me; at the rent-day I will not be able to pay; -- what matter? – I shall have lived, or tried to live, for a whole year.¹⁶

Since the possession of land is his only means of survival, if only for a time, the peasant “resigns himself to the chances of this cruel lottery” although “it is nearly certain that he will be unable to fulfill his rash engagements.”¹⁷

In his story “Tubber Derg”, William Carleton explains that the highest ambition of the Irish people is to hold a farm, and therefore they will, “without consideration or forethought”, offer a rent which “they must feel to be unreasonably high.” He considers this “a great evil”, but goes on to ask:

what ... must we think of those imprudent landlords, and their more imprudent agents, who let their land to such persons, without proper inquiry into their means, knowledge of agriculture, and general character as moral and industrious men? ¹⁸

Landlords and agents are thus implicated as at least partly responsible for the “great evil”, supposedly because of their greed. But Carleton also seems to suggest that the endemically lazy Irishman does exist, in spite of much contemporary protestation to the contrary. Dualta’s opinion of Ryan, restated by the incoming tenant, Tooley, suggests the same. Again, because Dualta does not

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 145

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, volume 2 [1843] (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), p. 397.

have much experience of “the system”, he does not realize that there just might be a reason for Ryan’s apparent laziness. As de Beaumont put it, “is it not a logical consequence, that a nation in which industry has never been honoured, rewarded, or free, should be lazy and idle?”¹⁹ Even R.B. McDowell, while allowing that there was “some truth in the accusation that the Irish peasant was often a listless worker”, argues that the reason was evident: “He was so burdened with arrears of rent that any extra exertion on his part merely profited his landlord.”²⁰ By conjuring up the image of the lazy peasant while giving no hint as to potential reasons for his indolence, Macken seems to suggest that, at least in some cases, the former has no one but himself to blame. This is reinforced by his subsequent representation of Dualta as a decent, hard-working man who struggles successfully to make a living off his small farm and manages not to fall into arrears in spite of high rent. As a result, Macken’s hero increasingly comes across as a more or less exemplary, rather self-satisfied character disposed to judging those whose situation he has not experienced.

But although Dualta is dismissive of men like Ryan, he is not blind to the perceived injustices that trigger violent resistance once confronted with them. As he watches the Ryans being driven out, their house demolished and burnt, he realizes how defenceless a tenant can be against the power of his landlord:

Dualta’s heart stopped at the sight. It brought back to him the sight of the death [burning] of the house of his Uncle Marcus. But that was free. That was done by a free man [Marcus himself]. This was different. (57)

Soon after, however, Dualta finds out that the “social war” is not just one of tenant against landlord, but also of poor against poor.²¹ As he sets out with Cuan’s gang to punish Tooley for bidding for the evicted Ryan’s holding, he is excited:

He thought: Maybe I should have stayed at home and organized something like this for the Half-Sir, but at least now I know. Now I know how it is done. It all gave you a feeling of power. That you were hitting back; that you were concealed and free from discovery. You were an anonymous freedom-fighter under the soft spring cloak of darkness. (58)

¹⁹ de Beaumont, *Ireland*, p. 195.

²⁰ R.B. McDowell, “Ireland on the Eve of the Famine”, in Edwards and Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine*, pp. 3-86 [37].

²¹ Ann Coleman has pointed out that “the poor were often victims also, when either through poverty or venality, they offended against the code of the secret societies and threatened the survival of their own class” (Coleman, *Riotous Roscommon*, p. 32), and according to T.N. Brown, “the peasant who took over a holding from which a fellow had been ejected did so in peril of his life” (“Nationalism and the Irish Peasant, 1800-1848”, in *Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1953), pp. 403-45 [427]).

Obviously under the false impression that the purpose of the expedition is to frighten the offender, Dualta is struck by a feeling of remorse as the true meaning of “hitting back” dawns on him when Cuan gives the order to burn Tooley’s house. Prior to the actual burning, there is a heated exchange of words between Cuan and Tooley, who defends his right to bid for the vacated land. Cuan reminds him that he has been warned many times and asks whether he pays “no attention to the wishes of the people.” Tooley, in turn, wants to know who “the people” are:

If they are men let them face me, not write letters behind closed doors like timorous women. I have a right to live. I have a right to feed my children. I have a right to better myself. And that I’ll do, if all the cowards in Ireland were gathered out there, skulking behind torches.

Disdainful of the threat of burning, he declares that he will build again and again, and that the only way of driving him out of the valley is to kill him. When Cuan points out that land grabbers have been killed before, Tooley retorts: “From the back of a bush [...] ... From a drain, from a ditch, where rats lurk” (59-60). I find this episode an indication of Macken’s disapproval of Whiteboy intimidation tactics, particularly as employed in the name of “the people” against the poorer class of farmers.

Although the burning of Tooley’s house causes him doubts regarding the justification of Whiteboy methods, the notion of the freedom-fighter retains its hold on Dualta. It is strengthened yet again when Cuan insists that he attend a hanging for “educational” reasons. “There has to be a purpose in the things we are doing”, he tells Dualta:

It’s not just ideas in a thinking head. There must be a reason. This is a reason. It is the working of landlordism. They insisted on a Coercion Act. You have to see the fruits of this if you want to know what we are fighting about. (62)

Cuan knows that one of the two men to be hanged for the shooting of a bailiff is innocent, the victim of an informer, and he merely laughs at Dualta’s expressed belief that “[t]hey wouldn’t hang an innocent man” (63). The fact that they would, and actually do, becomes even more appalling to Dualta when he discovers that the man is his friend Paidi, who would not even know “what side [of a gun] the ball came from.” At that moment, he realizes how useless it is to “scream” about injustice: “Who do you scream to, cold-faced indifferent officers of martial law, taking damn good care that somebody hangs to try and break a conspiracy of silence” (65-66). In Dualta’s estimation, hanging Paidi is equivalent to murder. “So now you know what murder really is”, he thinks to himself,

whether it is by the hand of a civilian or by the hand of rulers with all the outward show of justice and impartiality. This was no law. It was law without reason or hope for the people who came under its shadow. (67)

Here, Macken seems to be quite in agreement with Mitchel, who claimed that “there is no Law or Justice to be had in Ireland.”²² But unlike Mitchel, Macken does not make any explicit connection between this lack of justice and British hegemony, and thus his standpoint seems to revise that of many nationalists. For instance, although Michael Davitt acknowledged that the laws against Whiteboyism were initially “fashioned by the Irish landlord Parliament”, he went on to say that

[f]or the first twenty-nine years of the Union with England no measure for the protection of the Irish tenant was even introduced into the British House of Commons by any minister or member. Numerous acts were passed to put down disturbances and to make still more arbitrary the power of the landlord.²³

Davitt also maintained that the harsh measures employed by the government were counter-productive. “There was nothing but the argument of terrorism in these savage enactments”, he wrote:

Instead of arresting agrarian crime by rational methods, the law made itself the source of violence in appealing to a responsive sentiment of reckless savagery in a people who were made to feel that government and law combined were for them only a despotism without justice or mercy.²⁴

Some sixty years earlier, Gustave de Beaumont had expressed a similar opinion. “All your vigorous measures to restore peace and order will be abortive”, he declared, “because the order you design to make supreme is actual discord; because the peace you wish to establish is violence and oppression.”²⁵ Dualta’s response to the hanging indicates that Macken, too, sees violence as an incitement to retributive violence. Having watched Paidi die, Dualta is again convinced of the necessity of “hitting back”, and he agrees to become the “Trojan horse” in the house of Wilcocks, the landlord, which Cuan plans to attack and burn down. But while living under the same roof with Wilcocks and his daughter Una, his resolve begins to founder:

The trouble was ... that he liked Wilcocks. Principles to him were things that you stood for, and if necessary died for. It didn’t matter if the principles were faulty. Principles were what you yourself held to be the rule of life as you saw it. You stuck to those.

²² Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 8.

²³ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, p. 40

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁵ de Beaumont, *Ireland*, p. 150.

He comes to regard the landlord as

kind, thoughtful (except where the sacred rights of property might be in danger), generous (within the spoken limits set by the order of landlords...) ... Beyond all this he liked him because he had a sense of humour, and just because he was likeable. (99)

But in spite of his professed liking for Wilcocks, Dualta does have some reservations. The landlord's kindness is brought into question when, after Una has converted to Catholicism and left their home, he begins to evict tenants. Although Dualta reasons that the evictions are triggered by Wilcocks' sorrow at Una's defection, he does not think it is "fair that the little people should be struck to ease his pain" (96). Wilcocks' generosity, too, seems to be a somewhat contentious matter in Dualta's mind. Having kept the household accounts, he has learned that Wilcocks "fed many mouths", but he also knows that "the payment came from the highly priced acres of the tenants" (98). Dualta is forced to admit that there were many "who had been deeply deprived" by Wilcocks and, therefore, bore "an abiding hatred" for him (101). Nevertheless, his overall impression of Wilcocks remains positive, reflecting what I see as Macken's attempt to revise the "myth" of the predatory landlord.

Dualta's respect for Wilcocks complicates his mission as the "Trojan horse". On the evening of the planned attack, he has serious doubts about the whole undertaking:

Was it patriotism? How would the burning of this house advance the cause of patriotism? Wouldn't it only retard it? Wouldn't the soldiers and the police and the javelins and the bum-bailiffs exact a terrible price from the whole valley? (101)

In the end, he is unable to go through with his allotted task of leaving the window shutters open to provide access for the assailants. Yet as he watches the raid come to nothing, he is afraid that Cuan and his men will be caught: "He didn't want that either ... He didn't know what he wanted" (104). Although the collapse of Cuan's plan is ultimately due to Annie's double-dealing rather than to Dualta's failure to play his part in the scheme, he is troubled by the thought that he has betrayed his own people. Thus he decides to take the punishment from Wilcocks' men in the hope that it will purge him of the "distaste" he feels for himself and "make [him] one of the people again" (107). Having sided with Wilcocks against Cuan "for no clear reason", he recognizes the futility of taking sides at all since he "wanted nothing ... from any of them" (105). Rather, as he tries to explain to Cuan, he wants to be "commonplace" and to "dig and sow

and harvest, just being one of the people” (115). Having “learned to take blows”, as he claims, he makes the conscious choice of rejecting violent resistance. For Cuan, taking blows without hitting back is not an option. “No good”, he tells Dualta:

Sink into torpor like the rest? Have faith in God who hasn’t heard the cries of the Irish for hundreds of years? Be reduced to lower than serfs? No. You hit and hit and hit again[.] ... Only by inducing fear will you get alleviation. (116)

Although Dualta does not share Cuan’s belief in violence, he can still appreciate him, like he did Wilcocks, as a man of principles:

Cuan was a dedicated animal. A man of violence. Wherever he went he would bring that with him, but he knew what he wanted and he was prepared to do what he thought was right in order to do it. (114)

But as subsequent events show, Dualta is in effect not nearly as sympathetic to Cuan’s upholding of principles as he was to that of Wilcocks.

By juxtaposing the divergent attitudes of Dualta and Cuan, Macken emphasizes the polarities characterizing Irish life in the pre-Famine period. His intention, it seems, is to present Cuan’s and Dualta’s respective points of view objectively, and without specifically endorsing either one. Yet as the pacifist theme of the novel begins to emerge, such objectivity is rendered unsustainable. Consequently, there is a perceptible, though seldom unequivocal bias against Cuan’s creed of hitting back. For example, the planned burning of Wilcocks’ house is described as part of Cuan’s “large dream” of the whole country finally rebelling against the colonizer: “What he was doing here in a small way could be built up and spread so that it would take in a whole nation.” Knowing that the raid, if successful, is likely to provoke retaliation, Cuan still sees it as a means of turning the prevailing attitude of submission among the people into one of resistance:

If they took revenge afterwards on the people, so much the better. Out of persecution would come bitterness, a lust for revenge, and Wilcocks’ house could be a torch that lighted freedom in the south. (108)

The reference to Cuan as a dreamer and to his seeming insensitivity to what others might have to suffer because of his actions suggests that Macken sees little, if any, merit in violent resistance. As the novel progresses, Dualta and Cuan are repeatedly shown to be on opposite sides in this matter. Yet from time to time, Dualta vacillates in his resolve to forswear violence. The two of them hav-

ing settled in Cuan's native village in County Clare, Dualta remains susceptible to the influence of the older man for some time:

In a way he had been moulded by Cuan, but at many points he had resisted the moulding[.] ... One of them would have to bend to the will of the other, and he was still afraid of himself. (146)

On the night of his marriage to Una Wilcocks, Dualta's resolve is again put to the test. When Cuan arrives with the news that the landlord is about to demand payment of the hanging gale²⁶ three months ahead of time, the wedding feast comes to an abrupt halt. Many of the villagers, who are all in arrears, will not be able to pay since the harvest is not yet in. Cuan is again determined to employ Whiteboy tactics as the only means of stopping Tewson and his agent, Clarke:

I want a hundred men with me who will get their spades and in the light of the moon we will turn up ten acres of grassland. That will give them pause. That will set them back. (220)

Dualta rejects the proposal as "a bad notion", and in the ensuing argument between him and Cuan, Macken's attempt to present both sides of the coin impartially is again evident. And yet he seems to tacitly support his hero. This impression derives from the way in which the argument is represented. When Dualta suggests that they plead with Tewson for a respite, Cuan accuses him of having become a coward on acquiring a patch of land, but Dualta denies it. "Experience has made me see that what you want is wrong", he tells Cuan, adding that "[p]atience and sacrifice are more important than violence." For Cuan, patience and sacrifice spell submission, which he cannot abide. His reply that "[t]he priest has trained you well" (221) implies that submission is a result of Father Finucane's influence rather than Dualta's own choice. While Cuan urges the people to act and not "wait until caution clears our heads", Dualta pleads with them to desist:

Let us be patient, for the love of God. We are too many. We will force them eventually by opinion, by being educated ... Let us train [your children] to win for you while we hold on with patience and perseverance. I appeal to you. Don't listen to Cuan. He is my friend and I tell you that. (221-22)

But not only does the appeal fail to produce the desired effect, it also provokes Cuan to declare that he is no longer Dualta's friend. Thus what was initially an ideological argument between the two is brought to a personal level and, in

²⁶ The term hanging gale refers to the custom of taking six months' grace in the payment of rent.

the process, Cuan loses out. By having him question Dualta's courage, integrity and friendship, Macken subtly steers the reader's sympathies toward his hero's point of view.

Cuan's and Dualta's differences reach a critical point over the issue of tithes. All owners and occupiers of land, regardless of creed, were compelled by law to pay a tithe for the upkeep of the Church of Ireland and its ministers. That the Catholic majority saw this levy as an unjust burden is hardly surprising. As Gustave de Beaumont noted:

It is easy to conceive all the angry passions that must be produced among the Irish Catholics by this obligation to pay for the support of the clergy of a hostile faith: it is a tribute whose payment implies a sort of homage to the receiver, and to the superiority of the creed that he teaches.²⁷

If and when a person was unable or unwilling to pay, the authorities were entitled to seize and sell crops or livestock to cover the owing tithe. In the early eighteen-thirties, the Catholic peasantry who, as James Connolly put it, "continually saw a part of their crops seized upon and sold to maintain a clergy whose ministrations they never attended and whose religion they detested"²⁸ began to resist the collection of tithes by various, often violent means. In many counties, there were clashes between protesters and tithe collectors, aided by police, which often ended in considerable loss of life on both sides. This so-called Tithe War differed from earlier agrarian conflicts in that it had the active support of large farmers. Furthermore, it was all but approved by Church dignitaries like Archbishop MacHale and Bishop Doyle as well as by a number of Catholic parish priests and supporters of O'Connell.²⁹ Dualta, who by this time has become quite the O'Connellite, is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, he wants to heed the leader's exhortation not to pay up, and on the other, he is afraid of the inevitable consequences:

I do not want to pay these tithes, but I do not want to lose my cow. I do not know for sure but I feel that I am a coward. Now that I have something, I do not want to lose it. When I had nothing to lose I was not a coward. (228)

Yet in this case, he is again torn between Father Finucane's "sermons against violence" and Cuan's creed. "There comes a time", he concedes, "when oppression becomes too hard to bear ... and men must assert themselves." But when Clarke, who acts as both agent and tithe proctor in the area, arrives with his escort

²⁷ de Beaumont, *Ireland*, p. 182.

²⁸ Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, p. 121.

²⁹ Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, p. 574.

of police to demand payment of Moran McCleary, Dualta no longer seems to vacillate. "I hope to God Moran pays", he tells Una, "but I am in doubt. Cuan has been working on him" (229). Thus even before we find out that McCleary will not pay, there is a strong suggestion that his refusal is neither of his own choosing nor inspired by O'Connell's encouragement, but a result of Cuan's implicitly bad influence.

When Moran is shot to death by the police, the enraged onlookers attack them with sods and stones, eventually forcing them to retreat. Even the peaceable Dualta, provoked by the senseless shooting, takes part in the fracas. In Macken's representation of the incident, the authorities are clearly singled out as wholly responsible for the arbitrary killing ostensibly vindicated by a manifestly oppressive and unjust law:

A decent man was shot to death over a few shillings. He wouldn't get the benefit of a Coroner's Court. There was a Coercion Act in force. He was legitimately dead. He didn't matter. He wasn't even a footnote in history. (236)

But although Dualta recognizes the main culprits, he also blames Cuan who, for reasons undisclosed, has not been present at the scene of the shooting. "You will always bring death", he rebukes his former ally:

Only death to other people. That is what the great patriots do. They are like the generals. They are always safe behind the battles while they incite the innocent to die. (237)

Holding Cuan responsible for Moran's death is surely unfair, and Macken seems to allow as much by showing Una to be "displeased" with Dualta but compassionate towards Cuan. Yet at the same time, he implies that because his hero is "mixed up" (239), he should perhaps not be judged for making apparently irrational accusations in the heat of the moment. Moreover, although Cuan denies responsibility, his reaction to the tragedy suggests that he is in some way conscience-stricken. Declaring that he feels "truly desolate", he tries to assure Dualta that he "didn't mean Moran to die" and that he "didn't want this to happen" (237-38). It seems to me that Cuan is being apologetic not because he feels directly responsible for Moran's death, but because the strategy of resistance he advocates has proven counter-productive.

Although Cuan never renounces his belief in physical force as the only means of obtaining justice and freedom for Ireland, his apparent doubts about its effectiveness here serve to support Macken's pacifist theme. Cuan's creed is further undermined when the notion that the recourse to violence during

the Tithe War was ultimately futile is validated in a subsequent conversation between Dualta and Clarke:

‘So we lost the battle for the tithes,’ said Dualta.

‘No, you won,’ said Clarke. ‘Didn’t you know? Parliament have abolished the tithes. They have put the burden on the landlords.’

‘Who put the burden on us,’ said Dualta. (248)³⁰

Living as a small tenant farmer, endlessly struggling to survive, Dualta has become painfully aware of how injustice and oppression exacerbate the already difficult conditions governing the lives of “the silent people.” But even though he realizes that they have no voice, his aversion to violence prevents him from seeking change by means of physical force. Cuan’s way is not Dualta’s way, nor does it seem to be Macken’s. Although it is never explicitly stated, I find that a preference for constitutional over militant nationalism is discernible in the polarized characterizations of Dualta and Cuan. This preference becomes even clearer in Macken’s predominantly sympathetic portrait of Daniel O’Connell.

4.2. ‘The Liberator’

Daniel O’Connell’s name turns up already at the beginning of *The Silent People*. As Dualta and Paidi are starting off towards the South to find work, Paidi’s father, dismayed at Dualta’s talk of killing landlords, tells him to “[t]ake it easy”, adding that there is now “great talk of a man called O’Connell. He is only a Munsterman but there might be some good in him.” Dualta replies that he has heard of O’Connell but asserts that “[h]e talks. He doesn’t do anything” (34). By the end of the novel, his attitude has undergone a complete revision. When O’Connell’s body is brought home from Italy where he died in May 1847, Dualta sees his passing as the end of hope for Ireland: “He died when too many were dying. But his dying was exceptional. It was the end of hope. The death of an era.” What grieves him most is the premonition that O’Connell will not be duly appreciated for his efforts and achievements:

[his] enemies and his own too, [will be] spitting into his grave, small-minded men making crimes of his failings, mortal sins of his faults, and burying his greatness under a stone monument. Let me cry for that. (344-45)

³⁰ The Tithe Rentcharge Act (1838) converted the tithe into a fee to be paid by the head landlord, who in turn was allowed to add it onto the rent of his sub-tenants. James Connolly noted that although the tithe was thereby “deprived of all the more odious and galling features of its collection”, it remained an “economic drain” on the tenants (*Labour in Irish History*, p. 122).

Dualta's conviction of O'Connell's greatness originates in his and Cuan's meeting with the man on a Kerry hillside about a decade earlier, when they were on the run from their failed "mission" in Tipperary. Macken uses that meeting to expose the conflicting public attitudes to the man as Cuan's hostility is pitched against O'Connell's defensive argumentation. Dualta remains essentially neutral, but by the time they part, it is quite clear that O'Connell has won him over. "Have I sounded a chord in you"? he asks Dualta, who replies without hesitating: "You have played a tune on me. I am your man" (124).

Cuan, by contrast, seems determined only to find fault with the man. When O'Connell invites the two of them to eat with him, a surly Cuan declines the offer, saying that they have already eaten, "in the home of one of your evicted tenants. In a hedge house" (120). O'Connell appears unperturbed by the insinuation that he is an evicting landlord and offers no comment on Cuan's implied accusation. Although there is no evidence that O'Connell was a typical evictor, it would nevertheless appear that he was no model proprietor. Oliver MacDonagh has noted that he was "a 'traditional' Irish landlord, easy-going, negligent and unimproving", who entrusted the running of his estate to relatives. In this sense, he was an absentee, and thus the kind of landlord to whom many contemporaries attributed the prevailing misery among the peasantry. As MacDonagh argues, O'Connell "cannot be acquitted of farming out his work and responsibilities as a landlord, and giving only the light of a genial presence on rare occasions in return for rents."³¹ True, MacDonagh also claims that O'Connell "occasionally supported agrarian reforms in the tenant interest" and that "his native kindness ... earned him universal or near-universal popularity on his estates."³² Yet Henry Inglis, who travelled in County Kerry in 1843 and spoke with the people there, got the impression that "O'Connell is less popular in his own district than he is elsewhere." If one asked an innkeeper, for example, what sort of a man his landlord was, Inglis wrote, the reply was that he is "the best of landlords." But if the question was put to a cottier, the answer tended to be ambiguous:

If you step into a cabin, the holder of which owns Daniel O'Connell, Esq., as his landlord; and if you ask the same question, he'll scratch his head and say little any way.³³

³¹ Oliver MacDonagh, *The Hereditary Bondsman: Daniel O'Connell 1775-1829* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), pp. 189, 190.

³² Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell 1829-1847* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989), p. 26.

³³ Inglis, *A Journey Throughout Ireland*, p. 134.

If O'Connell's concern for his estate and his tenants was a matter of contention already in the eighteen-twenties and 'thirties, it became even more so in 1845. In what O'Connell himself saw as a spiteful attempt to damage his reputation, Thomas Campbell Foster, sent out by *The Times* to write a series of letters on the condition of Ireland, paid a visit to O'Connell's estate in Kerry. His subsequent report on the state of the properties and their inhabitants was anything but flattering. Foster found that O'Connell was "for two-thirds of his property a middle-man, living on a profit rent derived from small tenants" and that he permitted subdivision of land "to any extent." As a consequence of the "intense" competition for land, Foster wrote,

[tenants] will offer almost any rent for the most miserable fragment of land. In this condition they are left in a total state of neglect. They have ... no encouragement; none to lead or guide them, and the poor creatures are left to subdivide their land and to multiply, and to blunder on, until ... "their principal feature is distress."

The cottages which these tenants inhabited were for the most part in a deplorable state. Of Derrynane Beg, a property adjacent to O'Connell's residence and containing sixty-two houses, Foster wrote:

There is not a pane of glass in the parish, nor a window of any kind in half the cottages. Some have got a hole in the wall for light, with a board to stop it up. In not one in a dozen is there a chair to sit upon, or anything whatever ... beyond an iron pot and a rude bedstead with some straw on it; and not always that. In many of them the smoke is coming out of the doorway, for they have no chimneys.³⁴

Although Foster had seen many examples of "the wretched hovels of the peasantry" in his travels around Ireland during the late summer and autumn of 1845, he seems to have been particularly shocked at finding such conditions on the properties of O'Connell, who "held himself forth as the very pattern of good landlords."³⁵ O'Connell lost no time in refuting all of Foster's charges, and in an attempt to resolve the controversy the *Times* sent W.H. Russell over to provide a second opinion. He spent three days inspecting the estate, accompanied by, among others, O'Connell's son Maurice. Although Russell found that the housing conditions on a few of the properties showed "signs of improvement", dirt and poverty were nevertheless prevalent and the condition of the fields signalled a "very bad" system of agriculture.³⁶ Conse-

³⁴ Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, pp. 395, 396-97.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

quently, Russell felt obliged to confirm Foster's report. Addressing the editor of the *Times*, he wrote:

Having been requested to refer to your Commissioner's [Foster's] statement respecting the condition of the tenantry on Derrynane Beg, I can safely say that it is quite correct, as a description not only of their condition, but generally of all the property I have visited here[.] ... The people in general seem quite ignorant of the merest rudiments of agriculture.³⁷

Speaking at a meeting of the Repeal Association on 29 December, O'Connell challenged the accuracy of Foster's report and denied all allegations of rack-renting and neglect contained in it. At the end of the lengthy speech, he asserted – to great cheering and shouts of hear, hear – that he was “the first person who introduced improvements at the landlord's expense” in his district and that he was “principally instrumental in changing the order of things” there. He also claimed that he had instigated the practice of landlords paying for the improvement of housing, and that he was continuing that practice at present. Having pronounced himself the “refuge” of the poor and distressed who, “driven by other landlords from their property”, found asylum on his estate whenever he was able to provide it, he concluded:

I stand here the proud advocate of the poor and afflicted. I will say that I stand here the protector of the poor ... the support of those who would have perished but for my timely aid[.] ... Who ever heard of me turning out a tenant (loud cries of no one)? No, I never ejected my tenants.³⁸

All of this may of course have been totally true, and Foster's negative report could have been a manifestation of some antipathy or bias of his against O'Connell. But if Foster's allegations really were groundless, then why did O'Connell make such an issue of them? Why did he bother to enter into polemics, in public, with a “liar”, a “slanderer” and a “gutter commissioner”, as he dubbed Foster? And why was he not present to disprove the accusations in person when Russell visited Derrynane? Oliver MacDonagh reckons that the report “was probably accurate” and that Foster's unfavourable account could be explained in the light of a later statement made by Russell, who wrote:

I believe the tenants of Derrynanebeg were squatters, the evicted refuse of adjoining estates, who flocked to the boggy valley, where they were allowed to run up their hovels of soddened earth and mud.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 544-45.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 692-93. The entire speech as transcribed by the *Freeman's Journal* is included in Foster's book, pp. 667-93.

MacDonagh notes that “[t]his would have been quite characteristic of O’Connell’s conduct as a proprietor”,³⁹ but he does not discuss how such conduct would, or would not, be consistent with the image of O’Connell as a putatively good landlord. Macken, likewise, chooses not to dwell on the subject of possible evictions at Derrynane, perhaps because it would reflect badly on O’Connell.

Cuan sees another good reason for criticizing O’Connell in the fact that, in 1825, he was prepared to sacrifice the forty-shilling freeholders for the sake of Catholic emancipation. At that time, the government agreed to consider a Catholic Relief Bill on certain conditions, one being that the property qualifications for the franchise was raised. As a result, these freeholders would lose their vote although they constituted a significant part of the electorate. The bill eventually proved abortive, rejected by the House of Lords. The forty-shilling franchise was retained for the time being, but O’Connell was much criticized for agreeing to its abolition.⁴⁰ He meets Cuan’s criticism with the argument that the freeholders are the lackeys of “the Establishment”, going “in droves like cattle” to vote for whoever they are told to vote for. But as Cuan points out, although such has been the case in the past, the tide has now turned: “They put the Beresfords out of Waterford[.] ... They are braver people than you think” (122).⁴¹ O’Connell admits that Cuan is right, an admission implying that the disfranchisement of “the Forties” could have seriously impaired the campaign for Catholic emancipation. Yet he is not apologetic for having made the concession in 1825. “That’s dead now, that Relief Act”, he tells Cuan; “[n]ext time they [the freeholders] will be in” (122). Oliver MacDonagh has noted that, immediately after the Waterford election, O’Connell conceded that the freeholders had proved him wrong in doubting their potential. On his proposal, a pledge was taken by the Association “ever to reject Emancipation if it were coupled with their disfranchisement.”⁴² As it turned out, that pledge was to be broken in 1829 when the forty-shilling franchise was relinquished in exchange for emancipation.

The “Catholic question” reached a critical point with the County Clare by-election in 1828 when O’Connell decided to stand against Vesey Fitz-

³⁹ MacDonagh, *The Emancipist*, p. 282.

⁴⁰ MacDonagh, *The Hereditary Bondsman*, pp. 217-18; James H. Murphy, *Ireland: a social, cultural and literary history, 1791-1891* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 24.

⁴¹ In the general election of 1826, members of the Catholic Association managed to persuade the freeholders of County Waterford to go against their landlords and vote for a pro-emancipation candidate rather than for Lord George Beresford, who held one of the county seats. The result was a resounding victory for Villiers Stuart, the Association’s candidate. See MacDonagh, *The Hereditary Bondsman*, pp. 223-27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

gerald, one of the sitting members for the county. O'Connell's overwhelming victory convinced the government that emancipation would have to be granted in order to avoid a political crisis and possible revolution in Ireland. Macken's description of the election emphasizes the decisive role of a majority of the Catholic clergy and of the forty-shilling freeholders in the successful outcome. Going against the express prohibition of his superior to get involved, Father Finucane sets about persuading the eighty-seven voters of his parish to support O'Connell. "There is a Catholic standing for Clare", he tells them:

You are Catholics[.] ... He is a good man. He is the first one for many years who is capable of bringing you freedom for the practice of your religion. You have a measure of freedom now, but not in law. He will make your freedom lawful[.] ... Nothing good can be gained without sacrifice. You are afraid. You must conquer your fear and do what is right. (193-94)

This exhortation to courage for the sake of religious freedom appears effective since most of the voters eventually march with Father Finucane to the polls at Ennis under the banner of "O'Connell for Clare" (200). But Macken also shows how O'Connell's skills as an orator are instrumental in winning the freeholders over to his side, while at the same time crushing Fitzgerald and his chief supporters. The effect of that oratory is relayed through Una's partly disapproving, partly understanding attitude:

He annihilated them, she thought[.] ... The very moment he opened his mouth, power seemed to emanate from him[.] ... She could feel it herself, this attention he drew from you. Even if from her ... it was a sort of distaste, a sort of fear that a man who was opposed to your beliefs should have such power in him. The actual things he was saying were not more insulting than the usual political insults, but it was the way he said them that made them deadly. (203)

In spite of her feeling of distaste, which derives from the fact that she is not "a convert to the cause" and does not "like invective" (217), Una has a vague idea of why O'Connell's vilification of his opponents is so appealing to his supporters among the peasantry:

She thought she could understand some of the pattern of his insulting language. It was as if he was saying: Look, all your life you have to touch your hat and bow your head when one of the Ascendancy pass by[.] ... Now look at me. See how easy it is. Talk up to them[.] ... Assert your independence of speech. They have reduced you by cartoon and ridicule in everything they write about you. (204)

By her own admission, Una is “on the other side” because it is in her blood, and that is why she takes exception to O’Connell’s defamation of the aristocratic Fitzgerald. Yet she recognizes his “magnetism” and the emotional impact of his oratory on his listeners: “It was the words ... and the way he could play on the emotions of the people” that produced the effects he desired (204). Her observation that O’Connell is capable of reducing people to “wild adulation” is verified by the response of his followers, who are endlessly cheering and shouting out their support. When he addresses them directly, assuring them that “[w]e have freedom in our grasp” and that they are the ones who can provide it, they react as if the leader “had been dropping jewels in their path” (207). As Dualta, Father Finucane and their companions set out on their homeward journey, Macken describes their new-found optimism inspired by O’Connell’s victory:

For good or ill, it proclaimed the reign of the Liberator, a demagogue, a thief, a scoundrel, a saint, a hypocrite, according to your impressions. But here and now he was a never-ending shout of joy and release that followed them ... over a long trip on muddy and potholed roads that seemed to them as soft as cotton, as short as a happy dream, as promising as if paved with gold. (218)

Unfortunately for the poorest small farmers, such optimism proved to be premature. The Catholic Relief Act which followed in 1829 did nothing to benefit them directly, and actually took away their right to vote by raising the property qualifications for the franchise from forty shillings to ten pounds.⁴³ This, however, is another subject which Macken tends to avoid, again presumably because it would show O’Connell in an unfavourable light.

The Catholic Emancipation Bill received the Royal assent on 13 April, 1829. Yet as Oliver MacDonagh has noted that, only a month earlier, O’Connell had defended the forty-shilling franchise, calling for “decided, determined, energetic, but constitutional opposition” to its abrogation. But dwindling support from his Whig allies eventually brought him round to the opinion that the ten-pound franchise would “really give more power to the Catholics.” Thus his pledge to the forty-shilling freeholders in 1826 “dropped out of sight in the euphoria of the larger triumph.”⁴⁴ William Cobbett, a great admirer of O’Connell, much regretted that the franchise was lost, although he did not blame O’Connell for it. “The disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders”, he wrote,

has done more against Ireland than the elevation of the Catholic aristocracy will ever do her good. Catholic Emancipation has done nothing for the

⁴³ As a result, the county electorate in Ireland was reduced from 216,000 to 37,000 (Connolly (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Irish History*, p. 215).

⁴⁴ MacDonagh, *The Hereditary Bondsman*, pp. 266-67.

people at large. [The] Protestant hierarchy[,] ... the greatest evil of all, is still untouched.⁴⁵

Many of the poor themselves expressed their disappointment and frustration at the outcome. In 1835, the Bishop of Kildare told Alexis de Tocqueville about a neighbouring priest who, a few years before, met with a gang of local White-boys, reproaching them severely for their violence. Their leader defended them, saying:

The law does nothing for us, we must save ourselves. We are in possession of a little bit of land which is necessary to our and our families' survival. They chase us from it [...] ... We ask for work at 8 pence a day, we are refused[...] ... Emancipation has done nothing for us. Mr. O'Connell and the rich Catholics go to Parliament. We are starving to death just the same.⁴⁶

Similarly, a witness appearing before the 1839 Commission to inquire into rural unrest in Ireland testified to the disillusionment of the poorest classes. "I have heard their conversation", he claimed,

when they say: What good did emancipation do for us? Are we better clothed or fed, or are our children better clothed and fed? Are we not as naked as we were, and eating dry potatoes when we can get them? ⁴⁷

Over and above the chapter dealing with the Tithe War, there are only two allusions in *The Silent People* to the fact that emancipation did nothing much to alter the situation of the poor. When Tewson, the landlord, demands three months' outstanding rent ahead of time, Cuan sees it as an act of revenge on the tenants for having voted for the "wrong" candidate in the Clare election. "He waited a long time", Cuan remarks. "Now he is going to leap [on us] for the votes for O'Connell" (220). Although he does not explicitly blame O'Connell, Cuan is angered by the broken promises which have left small tenant farmers as defenceless as before: "Forty-shilling freeholders were to be protected. Where are their votes? Dead. Where are the ones that were to be saved from eviction? They are evicted" (221). Cuan's allegation that "disloyal" freeholders were evicted is apparently not unfounded. In his history of the Land War, published in 1870, the Protestant minister James Godkin wrote:

⁴⁵ William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Political Register*, Vol. LXVII (London: William Cobbett, 1829), pp. 562-63.

⁴⁶ Larkin (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland*, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, p. 109. Connolly himself stated it as his opinion that "the Catholics of the poorer class as a result of the [Emancipation] Act were doomed to extermination" (Ibid., pp. 106-07).

Emancipation was carried, and the people were disaffected still. And why should they not be disaffected? Emancipation had done nothing for them. The farmers were still at the mercy of the landlords, whose pride they humbled at the hustings of Clare and Waterford[.] ... The labourers were still wretched, deprived of the forty-shilling freehold, which protected them from the horrors of eviction.⁴⁸

Oliver MacDonagh has noted that the threat of eviction was very real, but although some landlords resorted to retributive action, “its precise character cannot be determined.”⁴⁹ Yet the defiance of the freeholders apparently contributed to a deterioration in landlord-tenant relations and an increase in evictions. In April 1831, a memorial addressed to the Lord Lieutenant, ostensibly on behalf of 150,000 tenants and cottiers, was published in the *Clare Journal*. With specific reference to unemployment, high rents for inferior land and the difficulty of procuring enough food for their families, the memorialists wrote:

[W]e have frequently, in supplicating and respectful terms, stated our grievances to the now resident gentry and landholders of the county, but up to this period they have taken no measures to relieve our distress, on the contrary, some of them have often told us, they considered all ties between them and the people for ever severed in consequence of our having exercised our undoubted and constitutional right in 1828, contrary to the will of our landlord.⁵⁰

There is another allusion to the negative effect of abolishing the forty-shilling franchise when Dualta attempts to renew his lease. At the expiry of the ten-year lease, Clarke demotes him to a tenant at will. The reason, he claims, is that “[p]rivate property is sacred. It must earn. It cannot lie fallow” (247). This is a rather obvious evasion of the real motive, given Clarke’s initial reason for granting the lease ten years before. At that time, he saw the advantage, not least to himself, of an abandoned farm brought back into cultivation: “He was constantly being pressed from the agent in Dublin who was pressed by Tewson in London[.] ... This [farm] which was earning nothing would now earn something” (180). The actual motive for depriving Dualta of his lease is very likely that described by John Mitchel. The forty-shilling franchise, he wrote,

had induced the landlords to subdivide farms, and to rear up population for the hustings. The Franchise at an end, there was no political use for the

⁴⁸ James Godkin, *The Land War in Ireland* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1870), pp. 281-82.

⁴⁹ MacDonagh, *The Hereditary Bondsman*, p. 227.

⁵⁰ Basil Davoren and Charles O’Connell, “Address of the Peasantry, 1831”, Clare County Library, http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/history/peasantry_address_1831.htm (26 October 2010).

people[.] ... Then began the “amelioration” ... of clearing off “surplus population,” and consolidating the farms.⁵¹

Mitchel was not the only one to take notice of this adverse effect of the disfranchisement on small farmers. In a conversation with Alexis de Tocqueville in July 1835, the Protestant barrister Thomas Kelly said:

Since the change in the electoral laws and the Emancipation Bill the landlords have busied themselves destroying the many small farms and consolidating them into larger ones. With this end in view they have evicted all the small farmers who were in arrears in their rent[.] ... This speedy eviction of a large part of the small cultivators has conspicuously increased poverty recently.⁵²

For Duala, the demotion from leaseholder to tenant at will means that he is no longer entitled to vote and, what is worse, that failure to pay his rent is likely to result in immediate eviction. As it is, he is already “at the greatest strain to make [his farm] pay” (247). The new terms dictated by Clarke – an added rent on the formerly exempt farmhouse and an extra charge for the use of the land to, as the agent puts it, “take care of the tithes you used to pay” (248) – will make it even more difficult for Duala to meet his obligations. But although his chances of survival from now on will be diminished, he gives no indication that his uncertain future is in any way connected with O’Connell’s concession to the government on the issue of the forty-shilling franchise. Nor does Macken offer any explicit reference to or comment on that connection; it is left for readers to decide whether Cuan’s implicit criticism of O’Connell’s conduct in the matter is justified or not.

O’Connell appears in the pages of *The Silent People* again in 1843. Three years previously, he had founded the Loyal National Repeal Association, whose aim was the annulment of the legislative union between England and Ireland and the reinstatement of an Irish parliament in Dublin. O’Connell’s demand for repeal was based on his firm opinion that, under the Union, Ireland had not been treated as an integral part of the United Kingdom. Catholic Emancipation, he declared in 1842, had resulted in “most valuable advantages” to the Catholic gentry, but he also admitted that

the benefits of good government had not reached the great mass of the Irish people, and would not reach them unless the Union should be either made a reality – or unless that hideous measure should be abrogated.⁵³

⁵¹ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. xlv.

⁵² Larkin (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland*, pp. 28–29.

⁵³ Quoted in O’Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union*, p. 271.

As the campaign to revoke the “hideous measure” began to gain momentum, O’Connell announced that 1843 would be the “Repeal Year.” Between March and October, the Repeal Association organized over thirty public demonstrations around the country, excluding the province of Ulster. These events came to be known as “monster meetings” since many of them were attended by hundreds of thousands of O’Connell’s supporters. At each of these meetings, the “Liberator” delivered lengthy speeches interspersed with crowd-pleasing promises of future changes that would benefit everyone. Speaking at Drogheda on 5 June, he said that Catholic Emancipation “had been ‘chiefly beneficent to the opulent upper classes,’ but that Repeal, accompanied by a series of sweeping social reforms, would be to the advantage of all.”⁵⁴ Patrick Hickey mentions several promises made by O’Connell at the Skibbereen meeting on 22 June. Referring to the “grievance” of the disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders, he “promised that after repeal every man with a house would have a vote” and that “every man would have the opportunity to own a house.” He also assured his audience that “taxation would be reduced” and the poor rate would be “abolished because the tithes would be used to support the poor.”⁵⁵ Addressing a vast crowd at Mullaghmast on 1 October, O’Connell said:

I will see every man of you having a vote, and every man protected by the ballot from the agent or landlord. I will see labour protected and every title to possession recognized, when you are industrious and honest[.] ... I will see prosperity again throughout your land[.] ... Stand by me – join with me – I will say be obeyed by me, and Ireland shall be free. ⁵⁶

It is hardly surprising that these speeches, full of promises of ultimate success, were enthusiastically received by the poor peasantry. As Henry Inglis somewhat cynically put it,

I am not at all surprised that a people suffering all the extremities of human privation, should catch at straws; and that Mr. O’Connell should find it an easy matter to raise a cry in favour of any thing which he asserts to be for the benefit of the people. ⁵⁷

The Catholic clergy, too, almost unanimously supported the repeal campaign, and parish priests often served as organizers of the mass meetings. Father Finucane’s colleague Father Pat, a teacher in the clerical college at Maynooth, is one of those who have total confidence in O’Connell’s eventual success. On the eve

⁵⁴ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 44.

⁵⁵ Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 112.

⁵⁶ Quoted in MacDonagh, *The Emancipist*, p. 238.

⁵⁷ Inglis, *A Journey Throughout Ireland*, p. 58.

of the Clontarf meeting set for 8 October 1843, the two priests are discussing the campaign in general and O'Connell's leadership in particular. Father Pat, who attended the meeting at Tara the previous August, is impressed by the leader's mastery of his audience:

He tells them this is the year of Repeal. We will get Repeal. We will get our own Parliament back where it belongs, the one Pitt stole from us forty-three years ago. They believe him.

Apparently, Father Pat believes him, too. When Father Finucane, perhaps slightly in doubt, wonders whether O'Connell really will get repeal, Father Pat retorts that nobody else will:

How can any Government ignore the moral pressure of a million people gathered on one place saying: We want Repeal! ... Since the beginning of history there has never been peaceful pressure like this brought to bear on a single subject[.]... That will be his great triumph if he succeeds, that he succeeded without bloodshed. (258)

Among Father Pat's students, there is one who has not been taken in by O'Connell and who does not see any advantage in simple repeal. "Who wants a Parliament back as it was before?" he asks:

What good was it to the people only to pass laws repressing them, and feathering their own nests? A bunch of unprincipled scoundrels is all they were, social criminals[.] ... O'Connell is gone soft in the head[.] ... The Young Irishmen are the ones for me, building a national ideal with power instead of blather. (258-59)

The frequent references to Grattan's Parliament in O'Connell's repeal oratory would suggest that what he had in mind was the reinstatement of the Irish Parliament as it was between 1782 and the year of the Union. But Oliver MacDonagh has argued that this was simply a tactic employed by O'Connell to calm British fears of "revolution, of popery and of separation" and to "convey the ideas of restoration and of Protestant security" while, as Isaac Butt contended, his real intention was "not to return to any state of things that previously existed ... but to enter on an untried and wild system of democracy."⁵⁸ Thus the student's remark could be read as Macken's tacit indication that O'Connell's aims were misunderstood by many and that he was by no means "soft in the head." Yet the student is not totally misguided in suspecting that, in and of itself, repeal might not do the poor much good. Already in 1833, O'Connell himself

⁵⁸ MacDonagh, *The Emancipist*, pp. 83, 81. For a discussion of O'Connell's uses of repeal, see *ibid.*, pp. 80-87, 235-36.

declared that his plan was to “restore the Irish parliament with the full assent of Protestants and Presbyterians as well as Catholics”, but that he “desired no social revolution, no social change.”⁵⁹ According to Kevin Nowlan, although the land question constituted the main Irish grievance, “social problems tended to be regarded as subordinate to the over-riding interests of repeal itself”, and O’Connell sought only “with spasmodic enthusiasm for some modification of the existing land system.”⁶⁰ By 1843, he was including the notion of fixity of tenure as one of the measures associated with repeal, but as Peter Gray has noted, “it was at first defined vaguely as opposition to ‘the clearance system.’” It was not until 1845 that the issue of land reform became prominent in O’Connell’s concept of justice to Ireland, and it did so largely because “he believed that failure to grant meaningful concessions could result in the outbreak of bloody social revolution.”⁶¹

In spite of the demi-god image bestowed on O’Connell in folklore, some of the poor apparently gave vent to a sense of disappointment with the repeal campaign, suggesting that the leader did not engage wholeheartedly in the effort to gain social and agrarian reform. Asenath Nicholson recalled the complaint made by a peasant woman in 1844. “It’s many a long day”, the woman said,

that we have been lookin’ for that same [O’Connell] to do somethin’ for us, but not a hap’orth of good has come to a cratur of us yet. We’re aitin the pratee [potatoes] to-day, and not a divil of us has got off the rag since he begun his discourse.⁶²

The fact that Macken does not elaborate on this particular aspect of O’Connell’s career can be seen as yet another indication of his predominantly sympathetic attitude to the leader. However, at the end of the Maynooth episode, there is an interesting passage which, intentionally or not, perhaps suggests a more ambivalent view. On leaving the college, Father Finucane muses on the debate of the previous evening:

Pity, he thought, ... that you cannot always remain behind those sheltering walls, loving the theory, not knowing the reality. Talking your head off, settling all the affairs of your country in one evening’s passionate oratory. (259)

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

⁶⁰ Nowlan, “The Political Background”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 169.

⁶¹ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 47,73.

⁶² Asenath Nicholson, *Ireland’s Welcome to the Stranger* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1847), p. 129.

On the surface, this seems like a well-meaning criticism of misguided idealism and youthful fervour, while also implying a vote of no confidence in Young Ireland. But is there also a suggestion that the “passioned oratory”, whether coming from supposedly idealistic young men or from O’Connell himself, is mainly based on theoretical assumptions which, ultimately, have little foundation in reality? Father Finucane’s reflection brings to mind that of another fictional character, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, who sees O’Connell as a windbag unworthy of the people’s adulation:

Gone with the wind. Hosts at Mullaghmast and Tara of the kings. Miles of eaves of porches. The tribune’s words howled and scattered to the four winds. A people sheltered within his voice. Dead noise. Akasic records of all that ever anywhere wherever was. Love and laud him: me no more.⁶³

Even if Macken did not intend Father Finucane’s thoughts to be read as a covert criticism of O’Connell’s “blather”, he acknowledges the anger and disappointment occasioned by the leader’s retreat from Clontarf. Time and again, O’Connell maintained that political change had to be won through peaceful agitation, not through violence and bloodshed. But as Marjorie Howes has pointed out,

[m]uch of [his] pacifist politics was based ... on the implicit threat of a mass uprising. His speeches sometimes employed martial language, especially when he wanted to whip up popular feeling at the monster meetings.⁶⁴

For example, at the Mullaghmast meeting on 1 October 1843, he said:

I will not risk the safety of one of you, I could not afford the loss of one of you ... and it is better for you all to be merry and alive, to enjoy the repeal of the Union; but there is not a man of you here that would not, if we were attacked unjustly and illegally, be ready to stand in the open field by my side[.] ... We came here to express our determination to die to a man, if necessary, in the cause of old Ireland.⁶⁵

Thus John Mitchel may not have been completely deluded when he claimed that, during the repeal year of 1843, the people expected a call to arms and “never believed that O’Connell would adhere to his ‘peace policy’ even in the last extremity.”⁶⁶ Yet that was exactly what he did at Clontarf on 8 October

⁶³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 181–82.

⁶⁴ Marjorie Howes, “Lady Wilde and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism”, in Tadhg Foley and Seán Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 151–72 [168].

⁶⁵ William J. Bryan and Francis W. Halsey (eds), *The World’s Famous Orations, vol. VI: Ireland, 1775–1902* (New York: Funk and Wagnell’s, 1906), pp. 198, 202.

⁶⁶ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 28.

when, after Sir Robert Peel had issued a proclamation banning the meeting, he decided to comply rather than risk a massacre.

In Macken's version of the event, O'Connell defends his decision on the grounds that bloodshed had to be avoided at all costs. "It would be easy to be a hero", he tells those supporters who argue that Peel's threat to disperse the meeting by force is a bluff:

I could say: Come! and they [the people] would come. They would walk into the mouths of the cannon. I could die with them[.] ... I would live forever. It is a great temptation[.] ... But I won't face God with the blood of innocent people on my hands. Make what you will of it! (262)

As the matter is argued out between Cuan, Dualta, Father Finucane and Cuan's brother Flan, the polarized attitudes to O'Connell are again evident. Cuan's view is consistent with that of Mitchel, who argued that O'Connell should have ignored the proclamation despite the threat of British military intervention. As Cuan sees it,

[O'Connell] had the greatest opportunity of any man in history, ... and he rubbed his name out of the books talking like a pious old woman. Even if a thousand had been killed wouldn't it have been worth the sacrifice? (262)

Dualta answers Cuan's question with the rather pointless observation that O'Connell himself "wouldn't think so", and Father Finucane, who has witnessed O'Connell's submission to the proclamation, is convinced that the leader did the right thing: "I don't think he was ever greater than at that moment", the priest argues. "His decision was worthy of a great poem." But Flan cannot agree with such a view. "He was not the voice", he insists. "How can you raise a million people to the stars and then dash them down? He was not worthy" (263). O'Connell's decision indeed proved "worthy of a poem", but not of the kind Father Finucane had in mind. Thomas Davis, one of the founders of the *Nation* and a central figure in the Young Ireland group, expressed his anger and disappointment in the poem "We Must Not Fail", published in the *Nation* on 14 October 1843:

We took the starving peasant's mite
To aid in winning back his right,
We took the priceless trust of youth;
Their freedom must redeem our truth.

We promised loud, and boasted high,
"To break our country's chains, or die;"
And, should we quail, that country's name
Will be the synonym of shame.

Earth is not deep enough to hide
The coward slave who shrinks aside;
Hell is not hot enough to scathe
The ruffian wretch who breaks his faith.⁶⁷

Flan's criticism evokes John Mitchel's censure of O'Connell's surrender to Peel's proclamation. Echoing Davis, Mitchel wrote:

For years he had been promising [the people] freedom, or his head upon the block; he had taken the starving peasant's mite, and the "priceless trust of youth;" and, now, let me not say he betrayed, but he disappointed that trust.⁶⁸

For many Young Irelanders, the Clontarf episode demonstrated that moral force and peaceful agitation would not necessarily prevail, and thus it marked the beginning of their estrangement from O'Connell and the Repeal Association. Yet as Charles Gavan Duffy noted in his political memoir many years later, the "Liberator" did not lose his popular support:

It must not be supposed that O'Connell's retreat was as visible at the moment as it is now in the perspective of history. The people were perplexed and anxious, but not disheartened.⁶⁹

Asenath Nicholson became aware of that anxiety when she travelled around in Ireland in 1844 and 1845. In Dublin, she spoke with an unemployed man who was worried about the state of the country and yet retained his faith in O'Connell. "[T]he country's dyin'; it's starvin'; it's kilt", he said, "[a]nd O'Connell won't let us fight, and I 'spose that's the best way." A labourer in County Tipperary was rather more frustrated by the fact that violence was banned by the Repeal Association. "They won't let us fight", he complained to Nicholson, "and, by dad, I would fight this minute if they would let me." The reason, he said, was that the people "are oppressed to death by the English, and [they] can't live much longer."⁷⁰ Macken acknowledges the actuality of bewilderment and apprehension among the people by having even a staunch supporter of O'Connell like Father Finucane admit that Flan's criticism of the leader might be valid:

⁶⁷ Thomas Davis, *The Poems of Thomas Davis* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1846), pp. 178-79. The "peasant's mite" refers to the so-called "Repeal Rent" which was collected to fund the repeal campaign.

⁶⁸ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 61.

⁶⁹ Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History* (London: Cassell, Petter, Gilpin & Co., 1880), p. 374.

⁷⁰ Nicholson, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger*, pp. 36, 139.

He has a point[.] ... How can you raise the hopes of the people so high, and then dash them? There has to be something to fill a vacuum[.] ... He has left too much undone, unravelled. (263)

James Cahalan has observed that Macken's representation of O'Connell "draws both upon the view of [him] as a failure during the Famine and on his image in folklore as the demigod of Catholic Emancipation."⁷¹ With Father Finucane's tentative admission that O'Connell has perhaps let his people down, the demigod image begins to crumble. But the priest still refuses to believe that the leader has lost his power to influence the government and to obtain concessions for Ireland. As the loss of the potato crop starts to take its toll on his parishioners, he sends Dualta to Derrynane to put their desperate case to O'Connell. What Dualta finds on his arrival is an enfeebled, sick old man who labours under the rather obvious delusion that, if repeal had been attained, the famine could have been averted. "No Repeal, famine, pestilence. It had to be", he tells his visitor:

If we had a parliament in Dublin, they would not let an ounce of food leave the country. You see. All for Repeal[.] ... I will get it. Without it we are dead. Like now. If we had Repeal would the oats be leaving the country while the Indian meal was coming from America? ... You must not give something for nothing. I will make them see. (284-85)

In spite of the assurance that he will "make them see", Dualta realizes that O'Connell will not be able to keep such a promise: "There was no hope[.] ... The voice was silent. It was weak and dying" (286). Consistent with Macken's generally positive representation of O'Connell, there is no trace of blame in Dualta's acknowledgement of the leader's fading powers. Thus the leader emerges not as "a failure", but as a once formidable man debilitated by hard work, advanced age and illness. "They will see this old man speaking in a cracked voice", Dualta muses:

He will have no command. They will greet him with a great silence. His thoughts will not be incisive. His magic will be gone. His enemies will gloat and the hearts of his friends will quail. (293)

According to James Cahalan, "[t]he Irish nationalist imagination seeks to preserve a memory of O'Connell as successful and admirable, rather than as the unsuccessful repealer or as helpless in the face of Famine."⁷² Although this may be true enough as regards the *popular* imagination, it appears somewhat misleading when applied to the concept of the nationalist imagination in a wid-

⁷¹ Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 36.

⁷² Ibid.

er sense. As Michael de Nie has observed, O'Connell's "final years were marked by ignominy that left succeeding generations of Irish nationalists deeply ambivalent over the man and his legacy."⁷³ Many of O'Connell's contemporaries, including Young Irelanders like Gavan Duffy, John Mitchel, James Fintan Lalor and Michael Doheny, were highly critical of his political strategies and of the kind of leadership he stood for. "To him and his teaching", wrote Mitchel,

I ascribe our utter failure to make, I do not say a revolution, but so much as an insurrection[.] ... O'Connell was, therefore, next to the British Government, the worst enemy that Ireland ever had – or rather the most fatal friend.

Yet at the same time, he admitted that "[t]o no Irishman can that wonderful life fail to be impressive."⁷⁴ Michael Doheny, too, deplored "the pernicious effect of Mr. O'Connell's teaching" and described his system as "fatal", while simultaneously referring to his "wonderful career."⁷⁵ Neither did O'Connell find much favour with the rebels of 1916. "He was a political strategist of extraordinary ability", wrote Patrick Pearse,

a rhetorician of almost superhuman power. But we owe no political doctrine to O'Connell except the obviously untrue doctrine that liberty is too dearly purchased at the price of a single drop of blood.⁷⁶

James Connolly questioned the whole idea behind the repeal agitation:

It is difficult to see how a promised Repeal of the Union some time in the future could have been of any use to the starving men of Clare, especially when they knew that their fathers had been starved, evicted and tyrannised over *before* just as they were *after* the Union. [original emphasis]⁷⁷

But O'Connell's worst fault, as far as Connolly was concerned, was that he did nothing towards improving the lot of the Irish labourers. As he grew in popularity with the Catholic gentry and the professional classes, Connolly claimed, he "ceased to play for the favour of organised labour, and gradually developed into the most bitter and unscrupulous enemy of trade unionism Ireland has yet produced."⁷⁸

Although Macken does allow for criticism of O'Connell in *The Silent People*, its implications are for the most part either evaded or rather convincingly con-

⁷³ Michael de Nie, "Ireland's most fatal friend", *Irish Literary Supplement*, 22 September 2008, www.thefreelibrary.com/Ireland's+most+fatal+friend-a0184538482 (11 November 2010).

⁷⁴ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 136, 135.

⁷⁵ Michael Doheny, *The Felon's Track* [1849] (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1951), p. xxvii.

⁷⁶ Patrick Pearse, *Ghosts* (1916), <http://www.corksinnfein.org/Archive/Ghosts.pdf>, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, p. 108.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

tradicted. In a novel which focuses on the struggle for survival of the impoverished Irish peasants, it seems odd that a character like Dualta, who personifies that class, should make no complaint about the fact that Catholic Emancipation did little or nothing for the poor, that their situation was compromised by the loss of the forty-shilling franchise, or that the struggle over the tithes was in effect lost. Cuan's insinuation that O'Connell is a bad landlord is treated as if the notion were totally unworthy of consideration, and in the ensuing altercation between the two, O'Connell not only has the last word, but his arguments seem to take the edge off Cuan's fault-finding altogether. A potential cause for criticism of the repeal campaign is evaded when the Maynooth student who suggests that simple repeal will not spell the end of repression is shouted down and his view is let pass as a theory without foundation in reality. Consequently, readers unfamiliar with the aims of the agitation remain unaware of the fact that there were no concrete plans for significant social change.

All of this would indicate that Macken's representation of O'Connell corresponds to how he was perceived in the nationalist imagination as defined by Cahalan. Yet because some critical voices are in fact raised, it might be argued that Macken does not force his apparent preference for the image of the "successful and admirable" man on his readers, but rather leaves it to them to make up their own minds about the "Liberator." There is no *obvious* coerciveness in his portrait, unless the omission of certain potentially compromising issues regarding the man's career is seen as a form of coercion. After the retreat from Clontarf, Cuan's Mitchelite notion of sacrificing lives in the cause of freedom appears cynical, not to say inhuman, when weighed against Father Finucane's and O'Connell's own view of the matter. Thus in spite of the priest's acknowledgement of the disappointment caused by O'Connell's decision and his reference to the "angry voices writing in *The Nation*" (263), the pacifist theme is sustained. Again, as in the case of Dualta's and Cuan's disagreement on the use of violence, Macken's obvious preference for non-violent resistance takes the form of a subtle ushering of readers in the "right" direction, and this does not amount to quite the same as deliberate coercion.

4.3. Pre-Famine poverty

In *The Silent People*, Macken also brings up the matter of endemic poverty. Why were the Irish lower classes so impoverished, and what were the underlying causes of their deprivation? Many contemporary observers who wrote about the condition of the poor in pre-Famine Ireland posed the same ques-

tions. In 1842, the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray spent five months travelling around Ireland. He recorded his impressions of the country and its people in *The Irish Sketchbook*, published the following year. Like so many other travellers before and after, Thackeray was appalled and depressed by Irish poverty as reflected by living conditions, unemployment and hunger. “Throughout the south and west of Ireland”, he wrote,

the traveller is haunted by the face of the popular starvation. It is not the exception, it is the condition of the people. In this fairest and richest of countries, men are suffering and starving by millions. There are thousands of them at this minute stretched in the sunshine at their cabin doors with no work, scarcely any food, no hope seemingly.⁷⁹

Although contemporary observers saw poverty as a defining feature of life among the lower classes in pre-Famine Ireland, they differed somewhat in their perceptions of its causes. The classical economist Nassau William Senior argued that the “surplus population” was one of the “principal causes of the poverty of Ireland.” Overpopulation led to subdivision of and competition for land, which eventually drove tenants into a poverty trap from which they were unable to rise. This in turn affected the landless labourers: employment became scarce and uncertain since the supply of labour was much greater than the demand. In Senior’s opinion, the possible remedies for these “material evils” were eliminated by the “moral evils” of Ireland, one of which was the indolence of the great mass of the people. Senior did allow that this moral defect could be traced, at least partially, to the unsatisfactory state of the prevailing land system. Still, the people themselves somehow emerge as responsible for their own misery in his writings. For example, he asserted that

[n]othing is more striking, in the long and intricate history of Irish distress, than the intimate connexion of much of that distress with the carelessness, the inactivity, and the improvidence of the sufferers.⁸⁰

Like Senior, Thomas Campbell Foster held overpopulation and its consequences responsible for much of the poverty that afflicted the Irish people. As to their perceived indolence, Foster was as ambivalent as Senior. In the preface to his *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, he wrote:

⁷⁹ William M. Thackeray, *The Irish Sketchbook*, vol.1 [1843] (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845), p. 146.

⁸⁰ N.W. Senior, *A Letter to Lord Howick* (London: John Murray, 1831), p. 67; *Journals, Conversations and Essays Relating to Ireland* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1868), pp. 26-27, 30-31, 43-47, 215.

I can arrive at no other conclusion – looking at the general absence of all enterprise and exertion, and at the general want of industry ... than that, for the poverty and distress and misery which exist, *the people have themselves to blame*. Nor do I think this blame belongs to any one particular class among them. [original emphasis] ⁸¹

Foster maintained that “short-sighted and impolitic” landlords were partly responsible for the apparent indolence of the peasantry. He argued that poor tenants could not be blamed for the defective cultivation of their land since they had no opportunity of learning better. Nor could they be condemned for failing to improve since, more often than not, any sign of improvement resulted in an increase of rent. And, because most small tenants had no security of tenure, the incitement to improve was further diminished. Thus there was no denying that the peasantry had been “beaten down and oppressed” and, therefore, could not “rise to the condition of comfort.” Yet Foster eventually came to the conclusion that

the people themselves are not blameless; and it would neither be impartial nor just to attribute their wretchedness, which in a great measure is the fault of their own apathy and indifference, entirely to the fault of the landlords. ⁸²

Gustave de Beaumont, on the other hand, insisted that the principal cause of all of Ireland’s misfortunes, including the misery of the labouring classes, was a bad aristocracy. This aristocracy, he claimed, was “motionless in its wealth, living on the life of others”, parasites supported by “a population also motionless in its misery.”⁸³ Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville contended that the aristocracy had produced “frightful poverty” in Ireland, and he characterized the country as “a frightful state of society” in which the upper classes “have all the faults and maxims of oppressors, the people all the vices and weaknesses of slaves.”⁸⁴ The findings of the Devon Commission confirmed that rural poverty was to a great extent the result of an oppressive land system. As Ned Lebow explains, the report of the Commission traced poverty to “the short-sighted policies of the landowning class”, and yet “parliamentarians, journalists and economists ... continued to rely upon the traditional moral explanation for Irish poverty.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, p. viii.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 63, 285-86.

⁸³ de Beaumont, *Ireland*, pp. 134, 138.

⁸⁴ Larkin (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Journey in Ireland*, pp. 8, 82-83.

⁸⁵ Ned Lebow, “British Images of Poverty in Pre-Famine Ireland”, in D. Casey and R. Rhodes (eds), *Views of the Irish Peasantry, 1800-1916* (Hamden, CT.: Archon Books, 1977), pp. 57-83 [61].

As many contemporary observers understood the matter, the land system was indeed a major cause of poverty. A common feature of that system was the imposition of exorbitant rents. Henry Inglis found that

with few exceptions, the landholders of Ireland cannot pay the rents which are exacted, unless by limiting their diet and their comforts within the bounds prescribed by the absolute necessities of nature; and ... notwithstanding their privations, a large proportion are in arrear.⁸⁶

Some commentators accused middlemen and agents rather than the proprietors of rack-renting. The French traveller Édouard Dechy argued that

[t]he middlemen, the under tenants and all the estate agents who are ... set up between the proprietors and the actual occupants of the land, live off the sweat of the latter and are the true lynxes of Ireland.⁸⁷

But as William Balch saw it, the owners of the great estates were no better in this respect than their agents and major leaseholders:

Land-owners, agents, and middle-men are alike the enemies of the common people. extracting the last penny, pound of butter, and hamper of potatoes for rents, taxes and tithes, to sustain, in idleness, the very men who cause their misery.⁸⁸

T.C. Foster noted that middlemen who were granted leases by landed proprietors paid a fair rent, but when they sub-let land to small farmers and cottiers, they charged at least twenty-five per cent above the value of the plot. “Such rents”, Foster explained, “keep the farmer and labourer in poverty and want”, since subsistence farmers barely able to pay their rent “cannot accumulate wealth into capital to employ labour.”⁸⁹ Unemployment, then, was another evil consequence of the land system. Henry Inglis noted that “the great mass of the labouring class in Ireland have no constant employment”, and Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that he had learned enough about the “unhappy” country to realize that “unemployment is the norm.”⁹⁰ As both Inglis and de Tocqueville saw it, idleness among the agricultural labourers was not a sign of some congenital moral defect but a result of all but chronic unemployment.

⁸⁶ Inglis, *A Journey Throughout Ireland*, pp. 367-68.

⁸⁷ Édouard Dechy, *A Journey: Ireland in 1846 and 1847* [1847], rpt. in Michael Hurst (ed.), *Contemporary Observations of Ireland from Grattan to Griffith*, vol. 1 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, and Tokyo: Edition Synapse, 2000), pp. 146-254 [209].

⁸⁸ Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It*, p. 284.

⁸⁹ Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, p. 78.

⁹⁰ Inglis, *A Journey Throughout Ireland*, p.368; Larkin (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland*, pp. 112-13.

Some of these perceived causes of poverty also emerge in Macken's description of peasant life in pre-Famine Ireland. Father Finucane's sudden realization that the chapel is too small for his growing congregation leads him to a further reflection:

Every year there were more and more children born. That was part of the trouble. If a family had half an acre they could grow enough potatoes to feed them for a year. So when sons and daughters were marriageable, they got married. Their fathers cut off another bit of their holding, they built a small house and they were away[.] ... Half the holdings in the valley were sub-let and sub-sub-let. (193)

Father Finucane's identification of population growth as "part of the trouble" reiterates the opinion of Senior and other contemporaries who held that overpopulation was a major cause of poverty. At the same time, the priest's conclusion implicitly rejects Mitchel's notion that there was no such thing as "surplus population." Thus it would seem that Macken accepts the revisionist view as stated by R.B. McDowell that "poverty and population were decidedly connected."⁹¹ The revisionist interpretation of the matter is further upheld by Father Finucane's observation that the peasants themselves were responsible for perpetuating the practice of subdividing land. Yet while McDowell acknowledges that landowners, too, were blameworthy for allowing subdivision, Macken's priest does not. Nor does he raise the question of how these "sons and daughters" were supposed to live if their fathers did not "cut off another bit of their holding." As Gustave de Beaumont saw it, subdivision was inevitable because the poor Catholic population had "absolutely no career open but that of farming." Therefore, he explained, "[t]he farmer who is anxious to assure the existence of his family, has no other resource but to subdivide his little farm into as many parts as he has children." For de Beaumont, it was not overpopulation resulting from early marriages that caused increasing poverty, but rather an excess populace dependent on agriculture, brought about by "the selfishness or carelessness of the rich:"

It was doubtless at first a great advantage to the proprietor to find such a multitude of petty farmers at his disposal; for without them he could not obtain any profit from his estate, unless he made an outlay of capital which he was unwilling to risk. ⁹²

⁹¹ McDowell, "Ireland on the Eve of the Famine", in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 3.

⁹² de Beaumont, *Ireland*, pp. 144-45.

In contrast, Father Finucane's view of the matter presents no such considerations. His conclusion that early marriage is "bad for congestion" seems to lay the blame for overpopulation squarely on the people themselves.

The tendency to lay the overall blame for poverty and misery on the people evident in the writings of many contemporary observers is discernible also in *The Silent People*. As noted earlier, Dualta sees Morogh Ryan as "a lazy man" responsible for his own downfall. Consequently, he is not inclined to give much consideration to Cuan's view that it is "the system" rather than the man that is to blame. Nor does he have any understanding for those who are wary of improving their holdings because they know, or fear, that they will be punished for it:

Men had said to him: Don't make it [the house] look pretty on the outside. You will suffer. Put your dung-heap outside the front door. Don't whitewash. Don't paint. Let it look as poor as possible. You will pay for your cleanliness[.] ... He didn't listen. (241-42)

As it turns out, Dualta should perhaps have heeded this warning. The hard work he has put into making his farm productive and "neat" and the house "pretty" is not rewarded. Noting that Dualta has "made a nice house out of the Bacach's place" (247), Clarke revokes the lease and raises the rent. Although this setback does not deter the ambitious Dualta from accepting the new terms and struggling on, it surely must make him more bitter since it seems to confirm his earlier misgiving that hard work holds no earthly reward for the likes of him. "Why wouldn't I be bitter?" he asks Una. "No matter how hard we work, your hands will never be smooth again" (226). But because he has "learned to take blows", he resists the urge to give vent to his bitterness in front of the agent:

Another time, Dualta might have hit him and destroyed everything. Now Clarke sardonically watched the white on the knuckles of his fists. He knew tenants at will could not afford displays of temper.

Yet in his own mind, Dualta turns the defeat into a sort of victory: "He felt that he had won a measure of respect from the disrespect of this independent stranger" (248). Perhaps because Dualta is able to meet adversity with a degree of equanimity and the determination not to let it get the better of him, he betrays a certain lack of compassion for those he perceives to be the authors of their own misfortunes because they are weak, like Morogh Ryan.

Finola's father, Mogue, is another case in point. When Dualta first learns that Finola is pregnant after her father has sold her body, he refuses to believe it. "There are ugly ways they seek to live", he tells Una, "but not this" (224). He seems to have forgotten what Cuan said about the likely fate of the daughters

of the evicted Morogh Ryan, which was exactly what has now befallen Finola. Having set out to confront Mogue, who lives on the outskirts of the town, Dualta is struck by the prevailing poverty and squalor in the area:

The houses were thrown at one another. The dirt ways between them were muddy and smelled of pigs and the dirt of dogs and the leavings of humans. Most of the houses wanted re-thatching. They were green with moss and decay, and the walls were stained green. Few of them had chimneys. The smoke came out of the open doors[.] ... Many children sucked thumbs as he passed. Very poorly dressed, almost naked, extremely dirty.

“Whose fault?” Dualta asks himself as he walks down the dirty laneway towards Mogue’s hovel. Is this misery attributable to a people who “wallows in pigsties and hugs the most brutish degradation”, as the *Times* put it,⁹³ or is the culprit in fact the ruling class, or perhaps “the system”, as Cuan would have it? Dualta knows that the people inhabiting these hovels are hard put just to survive:

They lived on a few roods of potatoes, a few day’s work during the year. Made enough to pay an exorbitant rent on the patch of land and the terrible houses. Sometimes they rarely saw an actual penny. They used their labour to pay their rent, and when that ran out they took to the roads, like migrating sparrows. Whose fault? (252)

Dualta does not answer his own question, but his reference to exorbitant rents and intermittent unemployment suggests an awareness on his part that it is not always fair, or even possible to hold people responsible for their own poverty and misery.

In the case of Mogue, however, Dualta is not disposed to be lenient since the former’s weakness for drink has demonstrably ruined the life of a mere child. “Are you human?” he shouts at Mogue. “You take her away and sell her body to a tinker for the price of a glass of whisky [.] ... May the great God rot you” (254). In his rage, Dualta does not stop to consider why it might be that Mogue is enslaved to drink. Rather, he perceives only a weakness in the man for which Finola has had to pay dearly. Mogue’s wife tries to explain why her husband has turned into the man he is, intimating that perhaps he should not be judged so severely:

We were put off three years ago by Cringe. He [Mogue] wouldn’t send the children to that school. So we were put off. We had to come down here. He was a good man. His place was fine. He lost his heart. (255)

⁹³ *Times*, 3 January 1848.

Formerly a tenant of the glebe lands, Mogue has been evicted by Cringe, the agent for the Protestant clergyman. “[B]acked by the sinister Kildare Street Society”,⁹⁴ Cringe has built a school in which he has “installed what he called a Catholic teacher” and then “commanded the children of his tenants to attend ... under pain of all sorts of penalties” (176). Because Mogue fears that his children will be subjected to proselytism, he refuses to make them attend the school and, consequently, eviction is the penalty meted out by Cringe. This, then, is the reason why Mogue has “lost his heart” and taken to drink. But the exemplary Dualta cannot quite see this as an acceptable explanation for Mogue’s reprehensible exploitation of his own daughter: “He still wanted to kill him. He wanted to tear him to pieces” (255). In Mogue’s case, the question “whose fault?” becomes irrelevant since Dualta seems predetermined to blame him not only for Finola’s defilement, but perhaps also for the abject misery and poverty of his family as a whole. If Macken sought to avoid falling into the noble peasant trap by portraying characters like Ryan and Mogue, Dualta’s negative attitude to them certainly serves the purpose. And yet in the course of the novel, Macken’s hero is predominantly represented as kind, charitable, honest, hard-working and, although victimized, still mostly uncomplaining – in short, the personification of the noble peasant.

Contemporary observers frequently commented on the apparent contentment of the Irish peasantry in the midst of poverty and squalor. Having toured Ireland in 1836, the Scottish clergyman James Page wrote:

The poor Irish work merely for their support; for what can, at the lowest calculation, sustain life. That obtained, they sit down contentedly in their cabins, in the midst of filth, and wretchedness almost exceeding what the greatest stretch of an Englishman’s imagination can conceive. For subsistence they will work[.] ... Beyond this their degraded condition does not permit them to pass.⁹⁵

In his *Irish Sketchbook*, Thackeray remarked on the “ragged lazy contentment” exhibited by the peasantry of Skibbereen. “Everybody seems sitting by the way-side here”, he wrote; “one never sees this general repose in England.”⁹⁶ In a

⁹⁴ The Society for the Education of the Poor in Ireland, popularly known as the Kildare Place Society, was founded in 1811. It received state funding for the establishment and upkeep of schools which were to provide non-denominational education without any attempt at proselytizing. By 1830, it had become evident that proselytism was in fact practiced in some schools, and the Catholic Church and the government withdrew their support (Connolly (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Irish History*, p. 299).

⁹⁵ Quoted in Lebow, “British Images of Poverty in Pre-Famine Ireland”, p. 69.

⁹⁶ Thackeray, *The Irish Sketchbook*, vol. 1, p. 174.

letter to the *Times* in 1846, an anonymous writer argued that the easy contentment of the Irish peasant was what kept him in perpetual poverty:

The great object of his life is to rent a miserable patch of land, to build himself a hovel, or burrow in the earth, to marry, and if possible, to live as well as his pig. The word "improvement" is not in his vocabulary, he is content to live as his forefathers have done.⁹⁷

The reference to lack of improvement reinforces the writer's intimation that the peasant himself was to blame for his wretched condition. Thomas Campbell Foster's view of the matter was that, even though contentment could be considered a virtue, it was also an evil because it generated a seemingly irremediable poverty. Foster even went so far as to claim that the peasantry thus contented must bear the blame for allowing themselves to be oppressed. "[I]t is the very virtues of the poor Celtic peasant which tend to his deterioration and wretchedness", he wrote:

He endures oppression, and he has therefore been oppressed and hardly used; his easy tractability of disposition has been taken advantage of; he has been put upon, screwed down without compunction, because it was found he would bear it. His contentment has made him rest satisfied with shelter and a turf fire, and potatoes and water to live upon. He rests content and satisfied with the very worst house, and clothes, and food, is happy so long as he can get them, and he strives for nothing better.⁹⁸

There are echoes of Foster's remarks in Cuan's attitude to the landless labourers who represent the very poorest stratum of the peasant population:

[I]t drove him to fury to see men content with their lot. He was always angry at the shabby people in the shack towns, ... ragged men with large ragged families erecting frail shacks made of wood and mud, begging, half-starving, drinking raw whiskey at times to drive away misery, but laughing, lolling in the sun in their rags, cuddling children with rickety limbs. Why did they submit to this? (108)

Yet in spite of the apparent similarities between Foster's and Cuan's views of the impoverished mass of the Irish people, there are some notable differences in their respective inferences. Foster saw contentment as something of an inherent character trait which, combined with laziness, apathy and a complete lack of enterprise, constituted "the soul of Ireland." For men with such a disposition, he argued, it was "impossible to rise" unless they were "forced and urged upwards."⁹⁹ Cuan, on the other hand, would dismiss Foster's view as sheer non-

⁹⁷ *Times*, 1 September 1846.

⁹⁸ Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, pp. 187, 288.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 582, 288.

sense. As noted earlier, he lays the entire blame for the miserable condition of the poor on “the system” as practiced by landlords, agents, bailiffs and strong farmers. In his estimation, the only remedy is violent resistance to that system. What infuriates him about these “shabby people”, then, is not their putative contentment *per se*, but their failure to meet oppression with resistance. But as indicated by Dualta’s rejection of Cuan’s creed and the author’s apparent endorsement of his hero’s stand on this issue, violent resistance is not a viable option in Macken’s fictional world.

Macken alludes to this, in the estimation of many contemporaries curious and deplorable contentment when he describes the workers on the Wilcocks estate who pay for their cottages and potato patches by their labour:

They were simple men, hard-working, grumbling, keeping themselves away from conspiracies as long as they had nearly enough to eat[.] ... They seemed to demand nothing else of life. This was their lot and until somebody bettered it for them they were going to accept it. They remained unfired by ambition. (97)

Even if there is no outright condemnation of these labourers here, there is nevertheless the implication that, at least in some measure, they can be held responsible for their own poverty since they make no attempt to improve their situation. But would ambition combined with hard work really serve to raise them out of poverty? It seems that Macken himself answers that question in the negative by showing how, after ten years of exertion, Dualta is punished rather than rewarded for his efforts. So are those who implement “the system” the real culprits after all then? With the possible exception of Wilcocks, whose character is somewhat softened by Dualta’s inclination to think well of him, they are quite consistently portrayed as oppressors of the poor. The fact that Clarke is a Catholic does not make him more favourably disposed towards the Catholic tenants, which suggests that his unfeeling treatment of them has its origin in class differences. He is described as “all-powerful” and “a nemesis hanging over the valley.” When rents are due, tenants are expected to pay up or, at the very least, “to give something to stave off eviction”(174). Even giving something is not always acceptable. “You will have no leeway”, Clarke warns Dualta: “Miss one gale day and you are out” (180). Cuan’s ironic characterization of the agent can be seen as reflecting how Clarke perceives himself:

If money runs low he [the landlord] pays a visit to spur Clarke to greater effort. Clarke rarely fails him. Clarke is a just man, you see. He is a good Catholic who works hard for his master as is enjoined in the Gospels. How can he be faulted for doing his duty according to the will of God? (127)

In order to stay in the agent's good books, tenants are obliged to offer "compliments" in the form of foodstuffs which most of them can sorely afford to part with. This makes for an additional burden on them since they already are hard put to manage the payment of "rent of land, rent of house, tithe tax, cess tax [and] turbary rent" (177). According to contemporary sources, the practice of taking bribes was not uncommon. Hugh Dorian described how the bailiff on the Leitrim estate in Fanad, County Donegal, was bribed in the hope of favours: "If any man bestowed upon him either money or goods, such a one was then a favourite with him and had a chance of escaping when another suffered."¹⁰⁰ A small farmer on the Kenmare estate in County Kerry told the Devon Commission that "the tenantry generally paid [the bailiff] bribes", and another farmer on the same estate said that the agent allowed his driver (the collector of rents) to practice "a regular system of oppression" and that "cows, sheep, and money" were given to the latter as bribes.¹⁰¹ Many informants to the Folklore Commission held that the men hired by landlords to run their estates were the real oppressors of the people. For example, William Doudigan claimed that "the agents were the mischief makers and always out to make the most of every situation to feather their own nests", and Michael Corduff supported his opinion that the landlords were not "half as bad as the native hirelings in their employment" by giving an example of the despotism exercised by the bailiff in a County Mayo townland.¹⁰² Clarke's tyranny is motivated not only by his desire to ingratiate himself with the landlord in order to reap possible rewards, but also by personal antipathies, as in the case of Moran McCleary. The incipient revolt against tithes gives Clarke an excuse to embark on a personal vendetta against McCleary, whom he uses to set an example for the valley:

It was a daring thing to do, because McCleary was one of the few with a two-life lease on his farm and therefore independent. But Clarke didn't like him. He told himself this was legitimate. He was sure McCleary was behind the revolt[.] ... McCleary had made a very good farm out of his acres. Clarke would have liked to give this farm to a more honourable man, but he was baulked by the lease. But as a tithe proctor he could harass him[.] ... His duty compelled him to it, he told himself. (230)

When McCleary is shot to death by Clarke's "rough-and ready boys", the agent insists that it was the man's own fault. "I have nothing on my conscience", is his retort to Father Finucane's implicit condemnation (234). Still, he has not

¹⁰⁰ Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster*, p. 235.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, p. 408.

¹⁰² Quoted in Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, pp. 218, 223-24.

interfered to prevent a deed which is nothing short of outright murder. But as Dualta observes, the agent is “always within his rights” when dealing with the tenantry (178). On the strength of that assumption, oppression is legitimate even if it ends in murder.

In his review of *The Silent People*, the poet and critic John Jordan wrote:

Its greatest defect, from a novelistic point of view, is Mr. Macken’s attempt to present all points of view on the tangled question of constitutionalism versus oath-bound violence, of pacifism versus intimidation.¹⁰³

As I have attempted to show in the preceding two parts of this chapter, Macken is indeed at pains to illuminate both sides of this “tangled question.” Although there is a discernible preference on the part of the author for constitutionalism and pacifism which finds expression in what I have called his subtle ushering of readers in the “right” direction, the authorial voice is not conspicuously intrusive. Predominantly, readers are left to make up their own minds on the issues addressed in the novel. Such is also the case in the matter of pre-Famine poverty: to whom, or what, should it be ascribed? Macken does not take any overt stand on this question. While it is suggested that “the system” and its upholders bear a great deal of responsibility, there is a perhaps equally plausible case for attaching some blame to the poor themselves. And in spite of the implications of the author’s introductory historical note, there are no specific remarks on how colonization and British rule may have served to establish and perpetuate that system.

4.4. A starving people with no voice

Melissa Fegan has suggested that Macken’s representation of the Famine in *The Silent People* may have been inspired by Cecil Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger*.¹⁰⁴ This is hardly likely since Woodham-Smith’s monograph and Macken’s novel appeared in the same year. On the other hand, Macken’s exploration of the subject reveals the influence of contemporary accounts as well as folklore. Long-established images of famine reappear in *The Silent People* just as they do in O’Flaherty’s *Famine*. Travelling the road towards Derrynane on his mission to explain the desperate situation of the people to O’Connell and to ask him to intervene more forcefully on their behalf, Dualta encounters a seemingly never-ending procession of starving and sick people in search of relief:

¹⁰³ John Jordan, “Genre Piece”, *Irish Times*, 20 October 1962, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴ Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine*, p. 30.

The people who moved on the road were like walking skeletons[.] ... They were all on their way to the towns or the poorhouses, unencumbered by anything except their tattered clothes[.] ... Feet raw and thin, dirty and red with the burn of the frost, and they were without greeting. This was a terrible thing[.] ... Some men were carrying old women on their backs[.] ... Some were wheeling their thin children in turf barrows[.] ... He longed with his whole heart for this stream of shuffling people to be ended. But it was never-ending. A few miles and then there would be more. (279)

Dualta is so disturbed by the sight of these “walking skeletons” that his brain is unwilling to register the reality of what he is seeing. William Bennett described a similar reaction in himself to what he had witnessed during his visit to Ireland in the spring of 1847:

The scenes of human misery and degradation we witnessed still haunt my imagination, with the vividness and power of some horrid and tyrannous delusion, rather than the features of a sober reality.¹⁰⁵

But whereas Bennett and others like him could eventually leave this reality which was not theirs behind, Dualta can escape it only through emigration or death. Moreover, he has to live with the fear that, one day, he and his family could become part of that horde of starving wretches wandering the roads.

It is perhaps his unarticulated realization that “it could be me” which compels Dualta to try and help some of these unfortunates. He assists a family consisting of a dying father, three emaciated children and a nearly apathetic mother in getting to the poorhouse in the nearest town, only to find the gates closed and “hundreds of people” waiting for the next day in the hope of being admitted once the number of dead inside has been counted (280). As in the case of the walking skeletons, the image invoked by both Macken and O’Flaherty of asylum seekers besieging overcrowded workhouses can be traced back to contemporary accounts. William Bennett was told by the master of Glenties workhouse in County Donegal that “the crowds who were every day refused admittance for want of room, watched eagerly the daily deaths, for the chance of being received into the house.”¹⁰⁶ The *Cork Examiner* noted that paupers seeking admittance to the Skibbereen workhouse had to “look to the *death* of their fellow-creatures as something to their benefit” and argued that it was “an awful thing to force on the mob a disrespect for *life*” [original emphasis].¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰⁵ Bennett, *Narrative of a Recent Journey of Six Weeks in Ireland*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 1 November 1847.

closed workhouse explains another sight along the road which Dualta finds greatly disturbing, namely the people in the turnip fields:

They were standing or sitting or squatting[.] ... The field had been full. They were eating what had been left, some soft with frost, some half-eaten by birds or rats. Some of them were nearly naked[.] ... Dualta hurriedly moved on. (280)

Here, Mitchel's "wretches prowling in turnip fields" reappear, but in Macken's version, they do not function merely as the embodiment of the consequences of colonial oppression. Although Macken does not explicitly condemn the way the authorities are dealing with the famine crisis, the inclusion of this image as well as those of the walking skeletons and the people shut out from the poorhouse suggests a critical attitude. Yet in this instance, he seems to be more concerned with representing the fact that people are starving than with apportioning blame. The focus is on Dualta's reaction to what he is witnessing, and his recognition that the seemingly inescapable starvation which has reduced the people to walking skeletons may become his lot as well brings readers closer to the reality of the victims.

What Dualta finds even more disturbing than the physical appearance of the starving people is the obvious change in their state of mind. Recollecting "the great jollity" which prevailed among the crowd travelling the road to the Clare election, he is painfully aware of a "terrible contrast" (279). Now, the famine has transformed jollity and song into apathy and silence: "This is the worst thing about it, he thought. It has brought silence down on us" (280). Like many other contemporary observers, Asenath Nicholson noted this change which she ascribed to starvation. "[T]o those who have never watched the progress of protracted hunger", she wrote,

it might be proper to say that persons will live for months, and pass through different stages, and life will struggle on to maintain her lawful hold ... till the walking skeleton is reduced to a state of inanity – he sees you not, he heeds you not, neither does he beg. The first stage is somewhat clamorous – will not easily be put off; the next is patient, passive stupidity; and the last is idiocy.

Nicholson's account of what it takes to bring a person who is "emaciated to the last degree" back from the brink of death — prolonged and careful administration of nutritious food¹⁰⁸ — suggests that Dualta's attempt to help the family he conveys to the poorhouse is doomed to failure. But as he is determined to

¹⁰⁸ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, pp. 38-39.

offer them at least some kind of assistance, he gives the only money he has to the mother. The futility of his effort is emphasized by her reaction: "Into the woman's hand he placed the two-shilling piece. She looked at it listlessly." Sunk into apathy, the woman can see no value in the gift, and Dualta realizes that, even if she did, it would not do her much good: "What could you buy with it? How long would it stave off the inevitable" (280-81)? This final manifestation of hopelessness drives Dualta from the town, away from the scenes of misery which have affected him so deeply that he finds he is unable to eat the oaten bread he has brought with him. In the course of one morning, William Bennett found numerous people dead and dying "from sheer want and exhaustion" and "high fever" in the streets of Kenmare. "It was difficult", he wrote, "to sit over breakfast after this."¹⁰⁹ As an outsider safe from the threat of starvation, Bennett manages his breakfast, albeit with professed difficulty. But for Dualta, who has witnessed the effects of hunger on people like himself, on *his* people, partaking of even a morsel of food proves impossible.

Contemporary observers also noticed how the starving people changed in their behaviour toward each other. Sidney Godolphin Osborne discovered that charity seemed to have vanished from among the peasant population. "It will be found", he wrote,

that the dying are refused food – shelter – left to die – put out of doors to die, even by those of their own class[.] ... It will be found, that every feeling of natural kindness, every tie of nature, all that once made an Irish peasant's charity proverbial, is in deliberate course of extinction.¹¹⁰

In his history of the Famine, Canon O'Rourke commented on the same phenomenon:

[A] common effect of the Famine was to harden the hearts of the people and blunt their natural feelings[.] ... Want and destitution had so changed them that a sordid avarice and greediness of disposition ... had seized hold of the souls of those who were considered the most generous and hospitable race on the face of the earth.¹¹¹

This change in disposition is apparent in some of the inhabitants of Dualta's valley, and he finds the reason for it to be self-evident:

The change in them was a symptom of the change in the land. People were hungry. They were afraid. You had to look after yourself. Who would do it for you if you didn't? (271)

¹⁰⁹ Bennett, *Narrative of a Recent Journey of Six Weeks in Ireland*, pp. 128-29.

¹¹⁰ Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, p. 151.

¹¹¹ O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, pp. 202-03.

Yet it seems that fear plays a greater part than hunger in producing this change, which is more pronounced in those who are better off than the average small farmers and labourers. Carrol O'Connor is a case in point. With his thirty acres, his cattle and sheep, he is rich compared with most of the other tenants in the valley, and his two-life lease means security for his family during his lifetime and that of his son as long as the rent is paid. When typhus fever breaks out, O'Connor shuts himself and his family into the house in an effort to escape contagion. Not even his married daughter who is about to emigrate with her family is admitted into her former home. "We could have died", the embittered Sheila tells Dualta: "All he cares about is his two-life lease and his oldest son. He will be happy to know we are away from his conscience" (270).

In spite of O'Connor's precautions, his son catches fever and dies. After the funeral, determined to save at least his own life-lease, O'Connor again retreats from the world to take shelter behind the ostensibly protective walls of his home. Consequently, Dualta is turned away as he comes asking for help when Una, who is recovering from fever, is about to give birth. "I have lost too much", O'Connor shouts at him:

I will not lose anymore[...] ... Go away, Dualta. I ask you, do not bring us the fever. I have had enough now. I am the last life. I will not be killed. I am the last life!

Through the character of Carrol O'Connor, Macken shows how self-preservation becomes such an overriding concern that it causes ruptures even within one and the same family. Moreover, it takes on a cultural significance because it signals the loss of the spirit of solidarity which typified pre-Famine peasant communities. Dualta senses this imminent loss in O'Connor's refusal to help: "How far are we driven from all the good things of our race?" (310) Yet as some contemporary observers attested, self-preservation was not always the predominant concern. As long as the poor had any means of helping each other, and as long as the fear of fever did not deter them, their charitable and benevolent disposition prevailed. Asenath Nicholson declared that "[t]he astonishing suffering and self-denial of [the] people for their friends is almost heart-rending", and Hugh Dorian alleged that a parent, "before seeing his children hungry ... would sacrifice anything however valuable."¹¹² Informants to the Folklore Commission gave similar testimonies. For example, Séamus Reardon of Eniskeane, County Cork, said that "[a]nyone who had anything to give, gave it with a good

¹¹² Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 83; Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster*, p. 215.

heart”¹¹³, and many others told stories of unselfish people trying to save neighbours as well as strangers from dying of want. In Macken’s novel, Dualta himself is one of the few whose compassionate nature survives intact. When Sheila refuses to take the meal her father belatedly has sent her, Dualta brings it on to Finola’s father, without a thought of his former disgust with the man. But it is too late for the Mogues as well; Dualta finds the whole family dead from typhus in their bolted-up hovel. Macken’s rendition of the scene recalls numerous others described in contemporary accounts.

For Dualta, the sight brings back unpleasant memories of earlier famine and pestilence:

He was back again in his terrified youth with fever and dysentery and scurvy; Irish ague, bloody flux, with all its symptoms and its smells and its appalling terror. He was tempted to light a fire and burn the whole place, bodies and all. (272)

Overcoming his terror and unmindful of the danger of contagion, Dualta carries the bodies outside and, with the help of Father Finucane and two others, manages to have them interred. The “funeral” is yet another example of how prolonged famine with its attendant diseases and deaths eventually makes the upholding of cultural practices impossible:

Dualta drove the cart and the priest walked in front saying prayers from his book. It wasn’t an Irish funeral. Where were the banners and the slow march of the wailing pipes, the jammed mourners? The people watched them from behind closed doors. (273)

In May 1847, Richard Webb of the Society of Friends remarked on how the custom of funerals was disappearing from the worst afflicted parts of Connaught. Before the Famine, he wrote,

the poorer classes ... were extremely tenacious of the credit and respectability attached to a good, large, well-conducted funeral[.] ... Few of the popular customs appeared more firmly rooted than this; but it has been swept away like chaff before the wind. In the most distressed districts, funerals are now rarely attended by more than three or four relatives or friends; they excite little attention, and apparently less feeling.¹¹⁴

That same year, the Reverend John East still witnessed “amazing funeral processions” in Dublin, but in the south and west, he claimed, people “have become almost indifferent on the subject” and they “think no more of the departed, if

¹¹³ Pórtéir, *Famine Echoes*, p. 200.

¹¹⁴ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, pp. 198-99.

they may but see a little earth laid over the uncoffined body.”¹¹⁵ Travelling the road to Derrynane, Dualta realizes that not even simple interment can be taken for granted any longer:

He had seen unburied bodies[.] ... His inclination had been to stop and bury the people, but if he did that he might spend his whole life at it. His brain was numb. He felt that he was empty of all emotion. (281)

Once again, Dualta is forced to admit the futility of his wish to be of use to others, even to those who are beyond worldly redemption. By having even as compassionate a character as Dualta succumb to emotional numbness, Macken emphasizes the enormity of the catastrophe and the apathy and hopelessness it generates.

Numerous contemporaries testified to the invaluable contribution of the Catholic priesthood to the relief effort. Even John Mitchel, although he censured the clergy for dissuading the people from rising in rebellion against “the tyrant”, recognized their persistent efforts to aid the starving and comfort the dying. “[M]any a poor rector and his curate”, he wrote,

shared their crust with their suffering neighbours, and priests, after going round all day administering Extreme Unction to whole villages at once, all dying of mere starvation, often themselves went supperless to bed.¹¹⁶

Priests served on relief committees and wrote letter upon letter to the press, the authorities and charitable organizations like the Society of Friends explaining the situation in their parishes and pointing out the urgent need for speedy and adequate relief. Canon O’Rourke noted that, in addition to all this, they had to cope with crowds of parishioners who came to them seeking help:

Their starving flocks looked to them for temporal as well as spiritual help and ... they [the starving] were continually in crowds about their dwellings, looking for food and consolation. The priest was often without food for himself and had not the heart to meet his people when he had nothing to give them.¹¹⁷

Father Finucane personifies the type of priest who, in spite of almost insurmountable difficulties, keeps working for the benefit of his flock. He writes letters to “the papers, to the Grand Jury, to the magistrates, to the landlords” (278), but in vain. The strain caused by the apparent hopelessness of the situation in the valley is beginning to tell on him, and he is inclined to blame

¹¹⁵ Reverend John East, *Glimpses of Ireland in 1847* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1847), p. 55.

¹¹⁶ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 115.

¹¹⁷ O’Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 210.

the authorities for starvation and deaths. “As of today”, he tells Dualta, “there are ninety-seven deaths in the parish. They don’t seem to care” (276). Donal Kerr has noted that after the blight struck again in 1846, the response of most clergy revealed a “confident reliance on the government.”¹¹⁸ Unlike O’Flaherty’s Fr Roche, Father Finucane seems to have put his trust in the government. But having exhausted his own resources, he is beset by the fear that government aid might not be forthcoming at all:

There is American meal being sent on American ships. Depots are being set up. There is not one in our town. Soon, they say, soon[.] ... The Board of Works are setting up task jobs. When will they be here? Soon, soon, they say[.] ... We are at the end of our own resources. If we do not get help then we will all die. (277-78)

Father Finucane’s words suggest a critical attitude to the tardiness of the relief efforts, and yet he concedes that there are mitigating circumstances: “Governments move slow, I know” (276-77). At the same time, he finds reason to question whether the meal shipments, if they ever reach the valley, will be of any use. “They cannot sell the meal until all local supplies are used up”, he tells Dualta. “Then it must be sold at the price prevailing in the district. Where will the people get three shillings for a stone of meal” (277)? Father Finucane’s concerns reflect those of a number of people involved in relief who complained about the delays in meal shipments, the restrictions on the sale of the meal and the consequent high prices. Some of them spoke out against what they saw as the government’s failure to alleviate Irish distress. In a letter to the editor of the *Times*, J. Craig of Cork expressed his hope that

you will not hesitate to expose the heartless proceedings of the Government ... with respect to the distribution, or rather non-distribution, of the Indian corn meal so prudently imported, about which so loud a flourish of trumpets was made in the House, and for which paternal care the English press appears to think we are so astoundingly ungrateful.

Craig proceeded to point out that, although the government have provided maize, “they refuse to give it for the relief of the poor of Cork, even for cash at cost price!” In conclusion, he stated his conviction that

[i]f Ireland is fed, England need have no fears of her fidelity, or her gratitude. But coercion bills will not do ... and least of all will free trade relieve a people who have so little to trade in.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Donal Kerr, *A Nation of Beggars? Priests, people and politics in Famine Ireland 1846-1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 34.

¹¹⁹ *Times*, 15 April 1846.

Father Theobald Mathew, who was working incessantly to relieve the starving people of Cork and Skibbereen, condemned the “heartless and unchristian policy, which consigns thousands of brave and virtuous Irishmen to starvation, disease and premature death”, and the Presbyterian minister W. Crotty denounced the government for allowing people to die on the excuse that “it is not the duty of government to intervene in providing cheap food ... lest the usual operations of trade be interrupted.” Crotty saw this policy as a “[m]iserable philosophy” since it sacrificed “one portion of the community to enrich and exalt the other.”¹²⁰ Compared with castigations such as these, Father Finucane’s criticism appears rather mild.

By having Father Finucane stop short of an outright condemnation, Macken seems to reject Mitchel’s contention that the government alone must be held responsible for the devastation which followed in the wake of the potato blight. This apparent rejection becomes more pronounced when the priest describes the reactions of potential helpers within the community. Bradish, the upstart “landlord of sorts” as Cuan terms him, has locked up his house and fled from the valley. There is nothing to be expected from Tewson, the absentee landlord, and Clarke has “pulled into the big house” and cannot be approached (278). Cringe, the agent for the glebe lands, has set up a soup kitchen, but since his aim seems to be the conversion of the Catholic poor, his soup is of no use to those who will not be proselytized. Appealing to the people’s understanding, Éamon, the shopkeeper refuses to give any more credit. “Things are very bad with us”, he complains to Dualta:

And if they start giving out free Indian meal, where will we be? ... You understand how it is[.] ... We are up to our ears in debt. Everyone wants credit. We have to pay for the things we buy. (294-95)

The comment that the shopkeeper “was still looking for sympathy when Dualta left” suggests that Éamon is, or at least should be, troubled by a bad conscience. Clarke, although otherwise unapproachable, does not fail to make an appearance when the rents are due, and he is determined to show no mercy. When Dualta asks to have half of his rent excused until the next gale day, Clarke refuses to even consider the request:

Do you know the state we are in? How many have not paid their rents? Where do we find money to keep going ourselves? ... The Poor Relief is only loans. For us it is poor rates and cess and tax. Where are we to find it? Aren’t half the people of Ireland eating off the poor rates? Where are they coming

¹²⁰ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 384; Crotty quoted in Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 155.

from? Who is paying for the poorhouses and the infirmaries and the extra doctors? (304)

Here, Clarke is speaking for landowners in their position as ratepayers, implying that their obligation to relieve the destitute poor is unfair. This mirrors the controversy arising from the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act which put the whole burden of relief on the owners of property. Irish landlords strongly opposed the measure on the grounds that it would eventually ruin them. Marcus Keane, the agent for some of the largest proprietors in Kilrush union, County Clare, claimed that of the rentals due from tenants, only about half were received by the landlords. Consequently, he said, “[t]heir incomes have been greatly reduced, and their charges are so heavy, and the rates so much, that it is with difficulty [they] can get enough to live.”¹²¹ According to Christine Kinealy, “the burden of taxation ... was uneven, a disproportionate amount falling on landlords, especially those whose estates were greatly subdivided.”¹²² Yet as both James Donnelly and Cormac Ó Gráda have argued, the fact that a considerable number of landowners were nearly insolvent or completely bankrupt by 1848 cannot be explained simply in terms of rental loss and increased poor rates. “A lavish style of living”, Donnelly writes,

together with defective laws which permitted the accumulation of debts far beyond the value of the security, meant that even before the famine a substantial section of the Irish landed élite was in a precarious financial condition. In fact, a significant number of heavily indebted landowners were past rescue.

Referring to “[t]he myth that the Great Famine was mainly responsible for the ruin of many Irish landlords”, Ó Gráda maintains that

the massive indebtedness of those landlords who succumbed in its wake suggests that the famine’s true role was that of a catalyst: getting rid of landlords who were doomed in any case.¹²³

Even if the amended Poor Law did not directly ruin landowners, its implementation hardened their attitude towards their tenants. Clarke’s refusal to compromise over rent payments can be taken as an indication of this. Dualta is forced to hand over the money which would have meant security for his family, and yet he shows no sign of resentment or anger. Does this mean that he (and

¹²¹ Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 150-51.

¹²² Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 348.

¹²³ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 162; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland’s Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), p. 59.

by extension, Macken) finds Clarke's argument valid, or does he see it as just another poor excuse for not helping people in need? Since Macken refrains from commentary the question is left open, and so is the matter of government responsibility for introducing a measure which, as Mitchel put it, "stifled compunction in the landlords."¹²⁴ Eventually, Macken nevertheless implies that Clarke, in his eagerness to please the landlord, becomes totally unfeeling to the plight of the tenants and is therefore to blame for aggravating their already precarious situation. When Fiacra McCleary's death from typhus terminates the lease on his farm, Clarke refuses to renew it and evicts the remaining family. With a feeling of great satisfaction, he sees them off the farm which "was too good for them" and will now become "very lucrative" for the landlord:

Sir Vincent will be pleased with me, he thought. Bit by bit I am improving his property, making it successful. He thought of the uneconomical holdings that had been taken over, the filthy cabins destroyed.

His lack of compassion for the victims is emphasized by the fact that he perceives the Famine as a godsend:

It was the best thing that ever happened to the country to get [people] off the bits and pieces of land, to divide it into economical holdings[.] ... There was a certain hardship involved admittedly, but it was all for the eventual good, and why would the good God have permitted it all to happen like this, if it wasn't meant to be? You had to be practical. That was good Christianity. You couldn't be sentimental[.] ... When it was all over ... [the country] would have been cleansed of the parasites. (327-28)

Clarke's attitude echoes that of administrators and others who perceived the potato blight as a providential blessing which, by eliminating the "surplus" population and the "curse" of potato dependence, paved the way for "a social revolution", as Charles Wood put it. Wood asserted that the blight "sent by Providence" had "precipitated things with a wonderful impetus, so as to bring them to an early head", and Trevelyan was convinced that it was "intended for a blessing."¹²⁵ In September 1846, a letter to the editor of the *Times* stated that

if the potato famine in Ireland were to continue five years longer, it would prove a greater blessing to the country than any that has ever been devised by parliamentary commissions from the Union to the present time.

¹²⁴ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 113.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 231-32.

A few weeks later, the paper announced its own opinion of the matter: “For our own part, we regard the potato blight as a blessing.”¹²⁶

In Macken’s representation, Clarke becomes the mouthpiece for the landlords who complained about having to shoulder the whole burden of relief as well as for those administrators whose providentialist and moralist thinking was a major factor contributing to the enactment of the amended Poor Law. Yet whether it is the government or the landlords and their agents who are ultimately responsible for the devastating impact of the policy on the poor remains unclear, and this can be seen as another indication of Macken’s reluctance to blame the government alone. In the matter of the quarter-acre clause appended to the Poor Law Amendment Act, he seems inclined to hold only the landlords responsible. He outlines the stipulations of the clause and, with pointed irony, remarks that it was instigated by “a fellow called Gregory, his name be blessed” (298). In an effort to protect landowners, William Gregory, an Anglo-Irish landlord and MP for Dublin, proposed an amendment to the Poor Law which ostensibly would reduce the financial burden arising from their obligation to provide for the destitute poor. Soliciting support for his proposal in the House of Commons, Gregory argued that smallholders should not be entitled to poor relief because

where a man held a large piece of land – half an acre, one, two or three acres – he was no longer an object of pity. He did not come before the public in *forma pauperis* – he had not given up his holding – he had not done that which, by the bankruptcy law, would entitle him to his certificate. When he did so he would be entitled to relief the same as any other destitute person, but not until then.¹²⁷

The amendment was carried by a large majority, and the members of Russell’s cabinet who supported it persuaded him to approve it as a concession to the Irish landed interest. As a holder of more than half an acre, Dualta is among those ineligible for poor relief and, like so many others, he has no intention of giving up his farm:

Men wanted their little plot of land. It would grow enough potatoes to feed them in the future when the famine was over. But Gregory and his kind thought there were too many smallholdings and they wanted them eradicated. So if you wanted relief you had to forfeit your holdings. (298)

The reference to “Gregory and his kind” suggests that the landlords rather than the government were to blame for exacerbating the misery among the poor

¹²⁶ *Times*, 1 September 1846, 22 September 1846.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 278.

although it could just as well be argued that the government was in effect the responsible party since it insisted on Irish property paying for Irish poverty, a policy which prompted the landlords to take counteraction in the interest of self-preservation. Macken re-emphasizes the culpability of the landowners by referring to their wish to get rid of smallholders, a wish that was gratified by the Gregory clause since it facilitated evictions on crowded estates. Yet the government's decision to transfer the responsibility for famine relief to the Poor Law and the consequent increase in rates appears to have been the main reason for the escalating clearances from 1847 onwards.¹²⁸

Macken's ambivalent attitude to the government's relief efforts is evident also in his representation of the public works scheme as it was carried out according to the provisions of the Labour Rate Act. Dualta and Colman, being "almost at the end of their own resources", manage to secure tickets for work on a road that "seemed to be starting nowhere and going nowhere" from the engineer who is not averse to bending the rules:

He was expected to ask how much land they owned, what was their rateable valuation; were they in receipt of meal under the Poor Relief Act? Many questions. [He] just asked their names and gave them tickets. (311)

The engineer's apparent disregard of the criteria for granting employment reflects the growing awareness among the Board of Works officials that the public works system was becoming an ineffective form of relief. In January 1847, an engineer at Castlebar, County Mayo, reported that

[t]he pressure for employment has now arrived at such a height, that nothing short of universal lists for the entire population will suffice[.] ... The maximum of one [ticket] to each family is looked upon as useless; and certainly the high price of provisions gives strong grounds for additional demands.¹²⁹

Captain Edmond Wynne, the Board of Works inspector for western County Clare, criticized the system and often "disregarded impracticable instructions" relating to its implementation. In retrospect, William Henry Smith, who managed works in County Roscommon, considered that everyone who sought employment should have had it because "surely men who would work at 5s. per week ... could not be too opulent for employment."¹³⁰ By portraying his engineer as a dissident comparable to Wynne and Smith, Macken signals his own

¹²⁸ Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork*, pp. 98, 112.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, p. 67.

¹³⁰ David Fitzpatrick, "Famine, Entitlements and Seduction: Captain Edmond Wynne in Ireland, 1846-1851", *English Historical Review*, vol. CX, no. 437 (1975), pp. 596-619 [601]; Smith, *A Twelve Months' Residence in Ireland*, p. 57.

critical attitude to the government's insistence on strict adherence to unworkable rules and regulations.

In the discussion between Dualta and the engineer as to the usefulness or otherwise of road construction, Macken again presents both sides of the issue. Dualta sees no sense in building "roads to nowhere", while the engineer attempts to defend the projects. "[H]ere and there", he argues,

there is a useful road going where no road ever went. So you see, by stealth we in the Board of Works are getting something done that would never have been done.

Dualta concedes that this is true, but adds: "There are so many beautiful roads being built to carry the bare feet of beggars" (313). His irony does not escape the engineer who nevertheless elaborates on his argument, pointing out the advantages of new roads:

The price of transport will be cut. Whatever you feel, a road is a good thing[.] ... The quicker a thing is brought from the farm to the port, the cheaper it will be. Everybody will benefit.

Dualta's response to this economics lesson – a hearty laugh – suggests that he finds the notion of "everybody" benefitting absurd. What use are roads to small tenant farmers who have little or nothing to trade in, and most of whom can only scrape a bare subsistence from their holdings? In contrast to the engineer's rosy view of future benefits, Dualta envisions how, within a few years, there will be nothing much left of the road they are working on; parts of it will be "buried as deep as hell." As such, it will be like the remnants which the poet Eavan Boland found in the west of Ireland more than a hundred years later, "small, bitter trails in the woods, giving out into a nothingness that made as true a comment on the Famine as any other visible sign of it."¹³¹ Dualta sticks to his view that building a road going nowhere and ending up in a bog is a useless enterprise and, as it turns out, his opinion is shared by the engineer. "Don't let others hear your thinking", he tells Dualta; "[t]hey might not agree with you like I do" (313-14). Thus although Macken does not indulge in explicit censure of Russell's government for putting restrictions on reproductive works, he seems to concur with the numerous contemporaries, including Board of Works inspectors and engineers, who were critical of unproductive work as a form of relief.

As noted earlier, many contemporaries criticized the bureaucracy involved in the administration of the public works scheme. One particular target of their

¹³¹ Eavan Boland, "Famine Roads", in Hayden (ed.), *Irish Hunger*, pp. 212-22 [216].

criticism was what they perceived as the undue waste of funds on the employment of clerks and other functionaries. Mitchel objected to the “innumerable officials” who were all “to be paid out of the rates”, and Isaac Butt complained that the remuneration of the labourers was “loaded with the enormous expense of pay-clerks and officials.”¹³² Another source of disapproval was the practice of favouritism. Captain Henry O’Brien, who acted as inspecting officer for the baronies of eastern County Clare, admitted that among his clerks, there were “sons of a clergyman, of a magistrate, and possibly of a grand juror.” According to Hugh Dorian, the government engineers were “sent out at a good salary”, and

the pay-clerks, check-clerks, overseers, and gangs-men or gaffers were appointed according to whether they had real or supposed knowledge or, better still, by intercession.¹³³

Dualta, too, remarks on the abundance of functionaries involved, on how their employment came about, and on the good wages they are receiving:

There were many men in charge of the work, gaffers and gaugers and clerks. These were ex-policemen or men appointed by the bailiffs or the javelin men who were assistants to the High Sheriff and whom he was rewarding. Dualta thought the staff was top-heavy, but this was to be understood in all government work. It was patronage. It was all right. It was part of life. They were well paid, these men. (311-12)

What conclusions, if any, regarding Dualta’s attitude can readers draw from these ruminations? Is he saying that patronage really is “all right” or, if not, that local jobbery is to be blamed, or that the government is the real culprit because the bureaucratic machinery they have set up for the administration of the works paves the way for corrupt practices? Or are his thoughts simply to be taken as an ironic inversion of the ostensible justification for such practices, suggesting that whatever “the silent people” think, those in power are always in the right? Because of Macken’s apparent commitment to impartial representation, his hero is prevented from taking an unequivocal stand one way or another.

The payment of the labourers’ wages was frequently delayed due to bureaucratic procedures and a lack of efficient staff. According to James Donnelly, there were “breakdowns in the elaborate system of paperwork” and “shortages of silver.” Overseers failed or were unable to “measure task work promptly”, and there was “dishonesty or lack of zeal on the part of the pay clerks.”¹³⁴ Thom-

¹³² Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 119; Butt, “The Famine in the Land”, in Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2, p. 163.

¹³³ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 151; Dorian, *The Outer Edge of Ulster*, p. 216.

¹³⁴ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 77-78.

as O'Neill has noted that pay clerks "were not always trustworthy" and that "unscrupulous" clerks occasionally took advantage of the delays by advancing meal to the labourers. When the cash eventually arrived, they "reimbursed themselves with handsome profit."¹³⁵ The Board of Works, and by extension, the government, was sometimes accused of causing deaths because it failed to pay out wages regularly. For example, when Denis Kennedy died on the works in the parish of Caheragh, County Cork, in October 1846, he had received no wages for two weeks. At the inquest, it was discovered that the money intended for Kennedy's gang of workers had mistakenly been sent elsewhere. The jury concluded that Kennedy had "died of starvation owing to the gross negligence of the Board of Works."¹³⁶ In Macken's take on the issue, there is no explicit criticism of either the government or the Board of Works, only an intimation that bureaucracy causes delays:

Sometimes [the pay clerk] didn't come with the money. There was a shortage of coins, or the order hadn't come through, This happened two or three times. One time they waited three weeks for their wages.

From Dualta's point of view, the pay clerk seems more deserving of censure than the government because, by taking advantage of the delays, the clerk makes it increasingly difficult for the labourers and their families to survive on the scanty wages. Dualta's obvious dislike of him is revealed by his ironic remarks on the devious conduct of the man:

[H]e was kind, this pay clerk. He loaned people money out of his own pocket and then when the wages came it was understandable that he should charge twenty-five per cent interest. Without his kindness they wouldn't have had any meal at all. (312)

By suggesting that, although indirectly, local officials aggravated the distress of the poor, Macken emphasizes his point that the government cannot alone be held responsible.

As in O'Flaherty's novel, the question of responsibility is left open in *The Silent People*. When the public works are shut down without warning, the labourers are told that the suspension of work is dictated by "law." Their reaction is one of bewilderment and disbelief: "Are they mad? ... What will we do? Where will we get food?" The engineer's protestations that the authorities "will do something" if the men can just "hold on" for a few weeks are met with resigned

¹³⁵ O'Neill, "The Organization and Administration of Relief", in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 229.

¹³⁶ Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 155.

scepticism: “In a few weeks we will all be dead” (315-16). Obviously, they realize that there is no more assistance to be expected from the government, but they express neither anger nor recriminations. In this instance, Macken seems to take his clue from those folklore accounts which tend to ascribe the disaster to the hand of God rather than to the shortcomings of government relief schemes. Yet the notion of a no-fault famine is challenged by Father Finucane’s criticism, however mild, of the government’s handling of the crisis. To further complicate the question, there is Cuan’s adamant contention that the Irish leaders in general and O’Connell in particular must bear the ultimate responsibility. Even on his deathbed, he presses his claim, saying that Dualta was wrong about O’Connell:

[He] spoke the wrong things. He should have called them [the people] out. Clontarf. Before. Millions to fight with their bare hands. They would have done so[.] ... Clean death and victory. Not like this, ... [b]y the roadside. In the ditches. Smelly stinking death. What came of peace? This. All this came of peace. (329)

At this point, Dualta no longer contests Cuan’s view, suggesting that even though he cannot see violence as the answer, political agitation seems to be an almost equally unviable option. As Father Finucane puts it, the Irish “have no voice” (277).

Like O’Flaherty, Macken does not attempt to represent the totality of the event that was the Great Famine. By focusing on “the silent people”, his story reflects what, in Lukács’s terms, should be the aim of the historical novel: “to portray the kind of individual destiny that can *directly* and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch” [original emphasis].¹³⁷ Macken’s chosen focus enables readers to share in and empathize with the thoughts, feelings and actions of the victims whose experiences tend to be overshadowed by other concerns in the revisionist historiography of the Famine. In portraying the hardship endured by the common people from pre-Emancipation times through the Famine, *The Silent People* echoes the traditional nationalist story of Ireland’s struggle against British oppression. Yet Macken’s take on the question of responsibility for the Famine disaster does not rhyme with the extreme nationalist position that puts the entire blame on the British government. Rather than concurring with Mitchell’s genocide thesis, he suggests that at least part of the blame must fall on landlords, agents, gombeen men, better off farmers, and local relief officials. In this respect, Macken seems to come closer to the

¹³⁷ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 284.

revisionist interpretation than to that of the nationalists. According to James Cahalan,

Macken's approach to Irish history ... could have been obtained only at the remove of many years, during the relatively comfortable period, both politically and economically, in which he was living and writing. In the 1960s both author and audience could enjoy unprecedented prosperity and detachment.¹³⁸

But although Macken suggests that the causes and consequences of prolonged famine are to be found in social rather than in political injustice, he is no apologist for the government's handling of the crisis. Thus in its interpretation of the Famine, *The Silent People* does not conform fully to either the extreme nationalist or to the revisionist reading. Instead, Macken's attempt to view things from both sides of the divide looks forward to the post-revisionist phase of Famine historiography. Yet if this approach to Famine history may be commendable in historiographic terms, it is not necessarily fruitful in a fictional representation of the event. Since the authorial voice in the novel remains largely unintrusive, the tension between the teller and the tale which produces much of the dramatic force of O'Flaherty's *Famine* is largely absent from *The Silent People*. Nevertheless, because Macken's focus is on the people who have no voice, his novel adds an important dimension to the story of the Famine which was arguably neglected by the historians who contributed to Edwards and Williams' *The Great Famine*.

¹³⁸ Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, p. 164.

PART III

5. CHALLENGING REVISIONISM

After the publication of *The Great Famine* in 1956, no Irish historian attempted a monograph on the Famine for three decades and, in the interval, academic journals carried relatively few articles on the subject.¹ In view of this apparent paucity of serious research, it would seem that the Famine had indeed been “laid to rest” by the contributors to the Edwards and Williams tome, as Hugh Kearny concluded in his review of that book.² Ironically, it was an English, non-academic historian who proved Kearny’s inference to be false with an account of the Famine which brought human suffering into sharp focus and cast a much colder eye on the British relief effort than *The Great Famine* did. Cecil Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger* was published in October 1962, becoming an instant bestseller on both sides of the Irish Sea as well as in the United States. Nevertheless, the reviews were by no means unanimously positive. Some commentators criticized Woodham-Smith for simplistically blaming the government and casting an individual like Charles Trevelyan as a villain whose influence on matters of relief exacerbated rather than alleviated the suffering of the starving Irish, thus implying that her interpretation reverted to the old nationalist orthodoxy. But did it really do so, or could it be seen as an initial move towards what, from the late nineteen-eighties on, became known as post-revisionism?

In 1999, the historian Alvin Jackson defined what he termed “counter-revisionism” as “a reassertion of patriotic certainties.” According to Jackson,

[s]ome (though not all) recent historians of the Famine have returned in tone and judgement, if not in methodology, to older narratives, illustrating the pain and brutality of the period as well as emphasizing the great burden of responsibility borne by dogmatic government ministers and civil servants. On the whole recent work ... has convicted the government of heartlessness and miserliness and a near contempt for Irish lives: [Charles] Trevelyan is restored as the flawed protagonist of a bloody gothic tragedy.³

A decade earlier, Cormac Ó Gráda described his work *Ireland Before and After the Famine* as a “post-revisionist interpretation of events of the 1840s.” Allowing that this interpretation “comes closer to the traditional story”, he also pointed out that “it keeps its distance from the wilder populist interpretations”

¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, p. 78.

² Hugh Kearny, “The Great Famine: Legend and Reality”, *Studies*, vol. xlv, no. 182 (Summer 1957), pp. 184-92 [192].

³ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998: Politics and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 3, 78.

such as Mitchel's.⁴ In 1996, Ó Gráda identified certain points which recent post-revisionist studies of the Famine had in common:

First, they re-establish the centrality of the Famine in Irish and European history. Next, they give due scope to its catastrophic dimensions. Third, they emphasize the unfriendly ideological and awkward economic contexts in which it happened.

These aspects, prominent in the “new history” of the Famine, indicated that

[w]e have come a long way from ‘revisionist’ claims that the famine was just a regional crisis blown out of proportion by nationalist propagandists, a mere catalyst of long-term change already in train or inevitable, or a tragedy which no government could have done more to alleviate. The ‘new’ history of the famine restores its tragic and world-historical significance and does not shy away from the political-economic aspects.⁵

The American historian Kevin Kenny has argued that post-revisionism “is not simply a euphemism for unreconstructed romantic nationalism” since it “concedes much of the revisionist case.” Kenny also notes that the post-revisionist perspective “rejects all talk of deliberate genocide”, yet at the same time it

points to a pervasive providentialist belief among British officials and opinion-makers that the famine represented an opportunity for re-making Ireland. The British government, moreover, bore direct responsibility for the actions it did and did not take to avert the catastrophe.⁶

In the opinion of the political historian Paul Bew, the “great and enduring achievement” of the new work on the Famine is that it “rightly lays emphasis on the perspective of the victims.”⁷ It would seem that some of the aspects which these historians have singled out as characteristic of post-revisionist Famine historiography are prominent also in Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*. Thus the author might perhaps be seen as a precursor of the future post-revisionist approach rather than a “zealous convert” to the “institutionalized pieties of Irish history”, as Roy Foster would have it.⁸

⁴ Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, p. 122.

⁵ Ó Gráda, “Making Irish Famine History in 1995”, *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (Autumn 1996), pp. 87-104 [88].

⁶ Kevin Kenny, “Author's Response”, *Reviews in History*, October 2001, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/articles/kennyKevin.html> (4 May 2009).

⁷ Paul Bew, “England's willing executioners?” *The Spectator*, 7 June 1997, p. 21.

⁸ R.F. Foster, “We are all revisionists now” [1986], rpt. in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 3 (1991), pp. 583-86 [584].

5.1. Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*: nationalist Famine history revived?

In his review of *The Great Hunger*, F.S.L. Lyons noted that the publication of the book had “released a torrent of muddled thinking” and “ungoverned passions.” Ugly words, he wrote,

were used in many reviews – ‘race murder’ and ‘genocide’, for example – to describe the British government’s attitude to the Irish peasantry at the time of the Famine, and Sir Charles Trevelyan’s handling of the situation was compared by some excited writers to Hitler’s ‘final solution’ for the Jewish problem. This response ... was not confined to Irish reviewers, not even to imaginative authors like Mr Frank O’Connor, but cropped up repeatedly in English periodicals also, occasionally in articles by reputable historians.

Such reactions, Lyons held, were “unfortunate” and “retrograde”, and he regretted that Edwards and Williams’s *The Great Famine*, with its show of “dispassionate scholarship”, had apparently been eclipsed by an account of the Famine which had caused “ancient rancours to erupt again.”⁹ So what was it about *The Great Hunger* that inspired such an eruption? Woodham-Smith herself does not endorse the genocide theory. The ultimate failure of the government’s relief policies, she concludes, spelled disaster for the famine victims, but there was no underlying plan to exterminate the Irish people:

These misfortunes ... fell on the people because the government of Lord John Russell was afflicted with an extraordinary inability to foresee consequences. It has been frequently declared that the parsimony of the British Government during the famine was the main cause of the sufferings of the people, and parsimony was certainly carried to remarkable lengths; but obtuseness, short-sightedness and ignorance probably contributed more.¹⁰

In spite of Woodham-Smith’s clear rejection of Mitchel’s genocide charge, the novelist and short story writer Frank O’Connor believed that “[s]ome analogy must have been present to her mind between the extermination of the Jews by Hitler’s Government and the extermination of the Irish by Lord John Russell’s.” To O’Connor, the fact that Woodham-Smith “drops the nasty word ‘genocide’ only to dismiss it” suggested that she was “aware of more sinister interpretations than she can admit – interpretations that need not the cool piety of the historian but the maddened poetry of some Biblical prophet.” It would seem,

⁹ F.S.L. Lyons, Review of Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xiv, no. 53 (March 1964), p. 77-79 [77].

¹⁰ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 410. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

then, that it was not so much what Woodham-Smith said as what she ostensibly withheld – by O'Connor's reckoning because of her “supreme tact” – that provoked his “retrograde” reaction. Given his stated preference for “Mitchel's Carlylean eloquence”, O'Connor apparently found Woodham-Smith too lenient on those he held responsible for an obvious “extermination policy.” Like Mitchel, O'Connor found the roots of that policy way back in the history of British supremacy in Ireland:

None of the whys and wherefores of the Famine can be rationally explained; it was merely the culminating point in a campaign of frightfulness that had been going on for hundreds of years ... and would have happened if the potato had never failed[.] ... The failure of the potato was an effect, not a cause.¹¹

“Genocide” was the title of a review of *The Great Hunger* by the British historian A.J.P. Taylor, who began by drawing a parallel between Ireland in the eighteen-forties and the German extermination camp at Belsen in 1945 with its “wasted bodies of 50,000 human beings who had died from starvation and disease.” In contrast to Woodham-Smith, who maintains that the eighteen-forties “must not be judged by the standards of today” (407), Taylor asserted that

British rulers of the 1840s were no worse than those who later sent millions of men to their deaths in two world wars; no worse than those who now plan to blow all mankind to pieces for the sake of some principle or other. But they were also no better. Though they killed only two million Irish people, this was not for want of trying.

This statement, together with Taylor's chosen title for the review and the analogy he draws with Belsen, suggests that he was not inclined to accept Woodham-Smith's refutation of the genocide theory unconditionally. Taylor conceded that there was no malicious intent involved: Russell, Wood and Trevelyan were

gripped by the most horrible, and perhaps the most universal, of human maladies: the belief that principles and doctrines are more important than lives. They imagined that rules, invented by economists, were as ‘natural’ as the potato blight.

Nevertheless, he considered their policies genocidal, and his emphatic verdict was that the Irish people had been “murdered” by the English governing class.¹²

¹¹ Frank O'Connor, “Murder Unlimited”, *Irish Times*, 10 November 1962, p. 8.

¹² A.J.P. Taylor, “Genocide”, *New Statesman*, 23 November 1962, p. 741.

In the opinion of the American professor Steven Marcus, *The Great Hunger* was

a work of unusual distinction, informed at every point by the knowledge that facts alone do not amount to history unless we include among them the fact of consciousness.

Marcus argued that although Woodham-Smith was wary of “tempting analogies” to concentration camps and “race murder”, *The Great Hunger* was nevertheless informed by “the consciousness of our own time”.¹³ He held that this consciousness was particularly evident in Woodham-Smith’s emphasis on the accounts of eyewitnesses, which revealed

the disparity that existed between what was happening and their understanding of what was happening, or between experience and their ability to respond to, much less master, it. The constant refrain of those who observed the famine is, ‘It cannot be described.’

This refrain, Marcus suggested, “recalls the statements made by witnesses when the concentration camps were opened at the end of the Second World War.”¹⁴ Like O’Connor and Taylor, Marcus had no qualms about ascribing the disastrous consequences of the potato failure to the British rulers. The only difference was that, whereas O’Connor and Taylor drew rather clear parallels between the government’s actions, or inactions, and a deliberate policy of extermination, Marcus saw an essentially uncompromising adherence to ideology as the ultimate cause of the catastrophe:

The belief in the economic theory of *laissez faire* was undoubtedly the controlling influence in England’s treatment of Ireland during the famine[.]... The point is that the English did not really want to relieve the Irish; they did not believe it was morally right, and from the standpoint of economic theory it was unsound and “unnatural.”¹⁵

And yet Marcus’s reference to race-murder suggests that he detected a more sinister element behind the ideology – an element which Woodham-Smith does not acknowledge.

Although Lyons found reviews like the above highly objectionable, he did not hold Woodham-Smith responsible for the inapposite analogies and emotionalism he felt the commentators had succumbed to. In her closing pages, he pointed

¹³ Steven Marcus, “Hunger and Ideology” [1963], in idem., *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 3-16 [5, 7].

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 12, 13.

out, she was “at pains to prevent” such responses. At the same time, however, some other aspects of *The Great Hunger* met with Lyons’s disapproval. He questioned the validity of judging Charles Trevelyan, as Woodham-Smith seemed to do, exclusively on the evidence of the “frantic complaints” by contemporaries and the “harassed and curt replies” the Treasury official gave to them. “Ought one not to know more about the discussions at various government levels”, Lyons asked:

ought one not to have more detailed investigation of government action – less how it took effect or failed to take effect, but more how it was motivated? ... [O]ught not the whole question of government intervention to be placed more firmly in its contemporary context? ¹⁶

Thus Lyons took exception to Woodham-Smith’s essentially critical appraisal of both Trevelyan’s and the government’s handling of the crisis. Given his own principle that the historian should be neither judge nor prophet, it is not surprising that Lyons should object to Woodham-Smith’s insistence on government culpability. But does she really overlook the contemporary context to such an extent that, as Lyons seems to suggest, her analysis is marred, perhaps even invalidated, by anachronistic judgements?

One can hardly disagree with Lyons’s view that Woodham-Smith paints an “unsympathetic” picture of Trevelyan. She describes him as a man of absolute integrity who had “a strong sense of justice”, but was nevertheless “not the right man to undertake Ireland” because he “disapproved of the Irish” and was “impatient with the Irish character” (59). In fairness, she might have added that it was most often the Irish landlords who met with his disapproval because he strongly felt that they were extravagant and improvident and that most of them exploited their tenants while neglecting them when they fell prey to hunger.¹⁷ Although Trevelyan had a “powerful mind”, an “admirably scrupulous character” and a commendable loyalty to duty, Woodham-Smith writes,

he had a remarkable insensitiveness. Since he took action only after conscientiously satisfying himself that what he proposed to do was ethical and justified, he went forward impervious to other considerations, sustained, but also blinded, by his conviction of doing right. (60)

This conviction often led to disagreements regarding the administration of relief between Trevelyan and officials in other departments who felt that their

¹⁶ Lyons, Review of *The Great Hunger*, pp. 77, 78-79.

¹⁷ Yet as noted earlier, Trevelyan held that *all* classes of Irishmen were habitually inclined to “make a poor mouth” and that the “great evil” which the government had to contend with was “the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people” rather than the famine itself.

work was made unduly complicated by bureaucratic procedures and that sometimes more flexibility and greater foresight was needed. Woodham-Smith gives numerous examples of such disagreements, showing that Trevelyan was seldom shaken in his belief that the government as well as the Treasury were pursuing the right course.

In a memorandum of July 1846, Trevelyan explicitly stated that, since the Board of Works was subordinate to the Treasury, “they are under their orders and the Treasury have full power to give them any directions they think proper” (79). Consequently, the procedures stipulated by the Labour Rate Act for giving employment on the relief works were to be strictly enforced. Harry Jones, Chairman of the Board of Works, pointed out that this led to interminable paperwork which was

so great that inspecting officers could do nothing else, and instead of being on the works, supervising and inspecting, they were forced to spend their days in an office. (150)

The understaffed department was expected to cope with the rapidly increasing applications for work and, at the same time, to keep the numbers employed down by maintaining strict official control. “We must at this stage throw all our strength into our inspecting machinery”, Trevelyan wrote in December, when over 300,000 persons had already been employed on the works. Not surprisingly, the inspecting officers found it impossible to keep the numbers down as more and more starving people flocked to the works, and Trevelyan blamed the Board for letting things get out of hand. “The exceptional rate at which Relief expenditure is proceeding”, he wrote to Jones in March, 1847,

and the lack of any effectual steps to bring it under control have attracted the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other members of the government[.]... It is impossible for me to describe in too strong terms the degree in which the public credit and safety are considered to be involved with you. (184)

But as Woodham-Smith sees it, the Board of Works could not be held responsible for the ultimate failure of the public works scheme. “It is not easy to understand”, she writes,

why the British government did not foresee what would happen; the relief scheme [of the Peel administration] so recently brought to a close had already demonstrated both the extent of destitution in Ireland and the difficulty of administering a scheme of public works; and now, after the total failure of the potato, with additional hundreds of thousands made destitute, the public works became impossible to control. (155)

One of the main functions of the Irish Relief Commission in Dublin was the management of the government food depots. Like the Board of Works, the Commissariat was directly subordinate to the Treasury, which meant that the distribution and sale of food stuffs imported by the government had to be approved by Whitehall. According to Woodham-Smith, Trevelyan and Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer,

had decided that, in the second failure [of the potato crop], there would be no Government importation of food from abroad and no interference whatsoever with the laws of supply and demand; ... the provision of food for Ireland was to be left entirely to private enterprise and private traders. (91)

Yet such a decision was hardly theirs alone to make.¹⁸ By August 1846, Russell's cabinet had agreed on the new policy. The government was to refrain "as far as possible" from interfering with private trade; the food depots established by Peel's government were to be closed down by the end of the month; only a limited number of depots on the western seaboard would remain in operation, but they were not to be opened while any produce remained from the harvest or private traders were able to offer grain for sale; and if it became necessary to issue government meal, it was to be sold at the current market price.

While these policies were being formulated, reports from Ireland kept stating that a second failure of the potato crop was a certainty. Woodham-Smith notes that the decision to close the depots "brought frantic protests" from relief committees, particularly in the west, where "the Government meal was all that stood between a swarming population and starvation." The Catholic Archbishop John MacHale protested against the closure, saying that it would equal the issuing of "an edict of starvation", and even the London *Times* failed to understand why the government "cut off supplies with the undisputable fact of an extensive failure of this year's potato crop staring them in the face"(110). Chief Commissioner Randolph Routh, too, had misgivings about the new policy. "You cannot answer the cry of want by a quotation from political economy", he warned Trevelyan; "you ought to have half of the supply which you require in the country before Christmas" (91). Routh seriously doubted that private traders would bring in enough supplies, and he knew that the pressure on the remaining government depots would be great. At the end of August, he again approached Trevelyan and Wood on the matter of government imports, but he was not allowed "to place any large orders" (118). By mid-September,

¹⁸ Trevelyan's influence in the matter was nevertheless noteworthy because his proposals for a revised policy were basically accepted by Russell's cabinet. See Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 65.

Woodham-Smith notes, “meal, except at enormous cost, was unobtainable by the relief committees” – the Irish meal-dealers had grabbed the opportunity to make large profits. According to Captain Pole, a Commissariat officer, dealers “buy up whatever comes to market and offer it again in small quantities at a great price which a poor man cannot pay and live.” Private enterprise, Woodham-Smith dryly comments, “was operating briskly” (119).

In early September, Captain Pole warned Trevelyan that, because of steadily increasing prices, the wages proposed for labour on the relief works would “not prove enough to buy food” (127). By October, Pole’s misgivings turned out to be justified: “The people”, writes Woodham-Smith, “even those with wages, were starving because they could not pay the exorbitant prices.” Consequently, members of relief committees, resident magistrates, landlords and clergymen repeatedly called on the government to open the food depots. But “even in the west there was no intention of opening [them] while any produce remained from the harvest – and it was considered produce did remain” (131). Woodham-Smith argues that this was a serious misconception on the part of the government:

British high officials, in spite of the previous season’s experience, failed to grasp the place of the grain harvest in Irish life. Grain and oats were not grown to eat but to pay the rent. ‘If the people are forced to consume their oats and other grain, where is the rent to come from?’ wrote the Commissariat officer at Westport. (122)

As Woodham-Smith points out, the underlying reason for not opening the depots was that “they did not contain sufficient supplies” (131). This was due to the government’s pledge to the merchants to buy only in British markets, and to the lateness of the orders for Indian corn which the Treasury eventually placed at the end of August. The corn factor was unable to deliver more than a fraction of what, according to Routh, would be needed¹⁹ because

the season for importing Indian corn was coming to an end, famine conditions in Europe had produced a demand previously unknown, and it had vanished from British markets. (120)

This setback forced Trevelyan to renounce “a basic principle of his scheme” and send orders for corn to the United States. But again, it was too late: “The

¹⁹ Troubled by the obvious insufficiency of the imports, Routh wrote to Trevelyan: “It would require a thousand tons to make an impression, and that only a temporary one. Our salvation of the depot system is in the importation of a large supply. These small shipments are only drops in the ocean.” Quoted in Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 67.

next arrivals of Indian corn from the United States could not reach the United Kingdom until the spring of 1847” (121).

As a result of the Treasury’s failure to initiate food imports as soon as reports of the return of potato blight started coming in, the government’s pledge to feed the west was broken. In reply to Routh’s request to supply particularly distressed areas in Mayo and Galway in November, Trevelyan wrote: “Our object ought to be to take care ... that no part of the districts in the west of Ireland for which we are responsible shall be destitute of the means of subsistence.” But, Woodham-Smith notes, “he now added a qualification, ‘as far as we are able,’ which effectually released the Government from responsibility,” and Routh was only given a vague promise of a small quantity of barley to be sent “sometime in the future” (139). When Routh suggested that some of the depots in the far west be opened for one or two days a week, Trevelyan categorically dismissed the notion by referring to Charles Wood, who held that the longer the opening of the depots could be delayed the better, “provided there is no real danger of starvation.” In a comment on this pronouncement, Woodham-Smith writes:

Trevelyan was writing [to Routh] on November 24; and so the deaths which had already occurred, and were occurring, were apparently not considered to indicate any ‘real danger’ of starvation. (142)

Routh, who was keenly aware that the situation in the west had already passed the mere ‘danger’ of starvation, made another attempt to persuade the Treasury to honour the pledge. In December, he wrote again to Trevelyan: “I wish you would consider that little important word ‘*quantity*’[.] ... [W]ith 4,800 tons in store, I am really afraid of the result” [original emphasis]. He suggested the purchase of ten or fifteen thousand tons “to keep the pledge to the west and secure the tranquility of the country.”²⁰ But Trevelyan remained firm in his reply: “Our purchases, as I have more than once informed you, have been carried to the utmost limit short of seriously raising the price in the London market” (160). Apparently, it was not only a question of food availability, but also of expenditure and the principles of free trade. As Alvin Jackson has suggested, in the matter of food imports in the autumn of 1846, the Treasury betrayed “a greater sensitivity for the rights of traders and the equilibrium of the market than for the starving poor.”²¹

²⁰ In the same letter, Routh warned Trevelyan: “[T]his is the principal point, ‘food,’ to which everything else is subordinate, and in which, if we fail, all our other successes will count for nothing.” Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 253.

²¹ Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998*, p. 72.

Although Woodham-Smith duly acknowledges the difficulty of procuring supplies for the government depots, she also demonstrates that expenditure constituted another deterrent. "European countries outbid Britain for supplies", she contends:

Ships bringing cargoes were diverted from British to European ports, and Trevelyan complained that France and Belgium, by paying higher prices, secured 'more than their share in the Mediterranean markets, besides placing large orders in the United States.' (118)

Her main point, however, is that food purchases commenced too late in the season for the depots to be adequately supplied, and for this she blames Trevelyan's procrastination. She also finds fault with him for continuing to insist, in spite of mounting deaths from starvation, on not opening the depots until "the resources of the country" had been drawn out, and for refusing to allow provisions to be sold below market price.²² Official permission to open the depots in the west was not given until 28 December. By that time, the scarcity of food, exacerbated by high prices, had already brought starvation to many areas, and the district of Skibbereen in West Cork had become notorious. The extreme destitution and mass mortality in the area was brought to public attention through the publication of reports by the Church of Ireland minister Richard Townsend and the Cork magistrate Nicholas Cummins.²³ According to Woodham-Smith, Townsend and a colleague travelled to London in early December. They met with Trevelyan, appraised him of the situation in their district and "implored the Government to send food", but in vain (161).²⁴ On 18 December, Trevelyan instructed Routh not to send any provisions to Skibbereen. This was absolutely necessary "in order to prevent a run on Government supplies", and there were "principles to be kept in view" as well (161). The numerous private and official appeals for government intervention were answered in a Treasury minute, drafted by Trevelyan, on 8 January:

It is their Lordships' desire ... that effectual relief should be given to the inhabitants of the district in the neighbourhood of Skibbereen[.] ... [T]he local Relief Committees should be stimulated to the utmost possible exertion; soup kitchens should be established under the management of these Com-

²² Government meal was eventually sold at a profit, with five per cent added to the current market rate. Under Peel's scheme, meal had been sold at cost price.

²³ These reports were corroborated by, among others, the *Illustrated London News* correspondent James Mahony, whose accounts of Skibbereen were published in February 1847.

²⁴ Townsend later described the people of the district as victims of "a most mistaken national policy on whom the principles of political economy have been carried out in practice to a murderous extent." Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 124.

mittees at such distance as will render them accessible to all the destitute inhabitants and ... liberal donations should be made by Government in aid of funds raised by local subscriptions.

“These counsels of perfection”, Woodham-Smith comments, “closed the discussion”, and “no emergency supplies were sent to Skibbereen” (164).

Ironically, food *was* available in the area. According to the Board of Works inspector, the local market was “plentifully supplied” with all kinds of food-stuffs, in spite of “all this distress.” Woodham-Smith calls this “an extraordinary contradiction” which was not understood by the government:

Trevelyan insisted that the ‘resources’ of the country should be ‘drawn out’, failing to realize that those resources were so utterly inaccessible to the unfortunate wretches dying in the streets and by the roadsides that they might as well never have existed. The starving in such places as Skibbereen perished not because there was no food but because they had no money with which to buy it. (165)

Cormac Ó Gráda has suggested that this supposed contradiction is “somewhat ahistorical in that it ignores the inequalities at the root of Irish society in normal times”, when those who died around Skibbereen would have been equally unable to afford the meat, fish and bread referred to by the inspector.²⁵ But I would argue that it is not Woodham-Smith’s intention to play up Mitchel’s “famine in the midst of plenty” claim; surely, her point is that emergency supplies provided by the government would have been warranted. Yet these were not forthcoming because, as the Treasury saw it, Skibbereen was not eligible. Apparently, as the Treasury minute of 8 January implied, relief was primarily to be a local concern, not a government responsibility.

When the depots in the west finally opened at the end of December, Trevelyan instructed Routh that meal should be offered for sale “as far as may be prudent and necessary”, but the rule of selling at market price plus five per cent stood fast. Routh informed Trevelyan that the people could not buy meal “at our prices to the extent that they require” and begged that they be reduced, but Trevelyan would not hear of it. “If we make prices lower”, he retorted, “I repeat, for the *hundredth time* that the whole country will come on us” [original emphasis]. This statement reflected his concern regarding the limited food supply in the depots, a state of affairs for which he himself could be considered at least partly responsible because of his reluctance to authorize imports before it was too late. His refusal to even consider a reduction of prices was also determined

²⁵ Ó Gráda, “The Great Famine and other famines”, in *idem.* (ed.), *Famine 150*, pp. 129-57 [146].

by his conviction that government interference with free trade would have an adverse effect. In January 1847, he told Colonel Jones that “it is indispensable that the prices at our depots should keep pace with the Cork prices ... else mercantile supplies will cease to be sent to at least half of Ireland” (168). For Trevelyan, the high prices were “a great blessing” because they had a “regulating influence” by limiting consumption in times of shortage (120).

Peter Gray has noted that, as Trevelyan saw it, famine was

an artificial condition, brought about by state meddling at times of scarcity; high prices were a providential mechanism designed to diminish the disequilibrium, ‘a mercy disguised under the appearance of a judgement.’²⁶

The fact that the purchasing power of a large number of the Irish poor was severely limited, and in many cases even non-existent, did not enter into the equation. Moreover, despite Trevelyan’s claim that “prodigious efforts were made by the mercantile community to provide against the approaching scarcity”;²⁷ the merchants failed to bring in adequate supplies in the autumn and winter of 1846-47. Thus the doubts expressed by a number of contemporaries that private dealers could, or would, promptly convey large shipments of grain to Ireland were substantiated. As Isaac Butt concluded:

The folly of relying on private enterprize [*sic*] to supply the [food] deficiency, is proved incontestably by the result. Private enterprize has not saved us from the horrors of the famine.²⁸

It was not until February 1847 that substantial cargoes of grain began to reach Irish ports. “Private enterprise was functioning at last”, Woodham-Smith writes,

and the ‘ample supplies’ promised by Government were actually arriving; but they were useless to the people. Destitution ... had gone too far ... and high prices and lack of money placed the long-expected food out of reach of the starving. (184)

By showing how mercantile theories applied to a pre-mercantile society ended in disaster, Woodham-Smith convincingly supports her own conclusion that obtuseness, short-sightedness and ignorance rather than outright parsimony determined the outcome. She also clearly establishes that these theories were seriously questioned at the time. The apprehensions and protests expressed by contemporaries, many of whom were daily witnessing the adverse effects of the

²⁶ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 252.

²⁷ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 52.

²⁸ Butt, “The Famine in the land”, in Deane (ed.), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol.2, p. 162.

government's policies, hardly warrant dismissal as mere "frantic appeals." Since Woodham-Smith pays due attention to these dissenting voices, criticizing her for failing to place the question of government intervention in its contemporary context seems rather unfair.

It is arguably an exaggeration to claim, as Woodham-Smith does, that Trevelyan became "virtually dictator of relief" when Russell's administration took office (61, 105). In the attempt to prove her point, she tends to overlook the role of Russell's cabinet and to conflate Trevelyan with the Treasury. Consequently, her analysis risks becoming impaired by an element of scapegoating. Yet as Peter Gray has argued, Trevelyan "indisputably played a wilful and destructive role in the relief administration of 1846, and was clearly motivated by his own policy agenda."²⁹ In pursuing that policy, which derived from his unshakeable belief in minimal state intervention and a moralist-providentialist view of famine as a God-given opportunity to reconstruct the Irish economic and social system and to wean the people from the "cancer of dependency", Trevelyan failed to live up to his frequently repeated declaration that, whatever the cost, "the people must not, *under any circumstances*, be allowed to starve" [original emphasis].³⁰ Woodham-Smith grants that Trevelyan had "performed almost superhuman exertions in the administration of the [public works] scheme" which had been "an ungrateful task." At the same time, however, she detects a certain evasion of responsibility in his vindication of divine providence:

He felt that he had done his best and could do no more[.] ... The thought that famine was the will of God was a consolation to him[.] ... 'It is hard upon the poor people that they should be deprived of knowing that they are suffering from an affliction of God's providence,' he wrote. (177)

This is the only reference she makes to Trevelyan's belief in a retributive yet benevolent and "all-wise" Providence. But as Peter Gray has pointed out, providentialist ideas "interacted in powerful and complex ways with aspects of political economy" and were embraced by "a large proportion of the political elite."³¹ If Woodham-Smith had recognized the importance of providentialist thinking in the mindset of key figures like Charles Wood, Earl Grey and George Grey, Trevelyan's prominent role in devising and implementing relief

²⁹ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 135.

³⁰ Quoted in Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), pp. 85, 139, 190.

³¹ Peter Gray, "Potatoes and Providence: British Government Responses to the Great Famine", *Bullán*, vol.1, no.1 (1994), pp. 75-90 [76].

policies, as well as his preoccupation with safeguarding free trade, would have been more clearly contextualized.

Although Woodham-Smith is critical of the government's reliance on public works as an exclusive system of relief and of their failure to import emergency supplies in 1846, she concludes that there was "considerable generosity" involved in the relief effort as a whole:

An elaborate relief organization was set up, public works were started on a scale never attempted before, and what was, for the time, a very large sum of money indeed, more than eight million pounds, was advanced. Not enough was done, considering the size of the catastrophe, but it is doubtful if any Government in Europe, at that date, would have done more. (408)³²

On the other hand, she finds little reason to praise the soup kitchen scheme provided under the Temporary Relief Act of February, 1847. Bureaucratic procedures again made for considerable delays in the scheme's implementation. The issuing of cooked food to the destitute poor was set to begin in mid-March, but as Woodham-Smith notes,

[i]n their official report for May, the Relief Commissioners admitted that only about half the electoral divisions ... had soup kitchens, and some districts ... though badly distressed, still had no kitchen in June. (287)

Because the public works were closing down during the spring and early summer, delays in commencing distribution meant that the starving people in some areas were left completely without means of subsistence for weeks. When soup eventually became available, it was "severely restricted both in quality and quantity." Woodham-Smith gives several examples of misgivings expressed by contemporaries regarding the nutritional value, the medical effects and the adequacy of the government rations (178-79, 294-95). Given the already much debilitated physical condition of the poor, "all the soup kitchens did was to prevent people actually dying of starvation." Complaints about inadequate rations and poor quality were dismissed with a formulaic official reply: "the ration issued had been approved by the Board of Health" (295). Despite initial delays, the soup kitchen scheme provided relief for over three million people at its peak in July 1847. Woodham-Smith records this fact, while also allowing that the scheme was an "administrative triumph" (296). In fairness, she might also have noted that this form of relief constituted a significant deviation from

³² In making this assessment, Woodham-Smith overlooks the fact that some northwestern European governments did in fact do more to mitigate the effects of severe food shortages. See Peter Gray, "Famine relief policy in comparative perspective."

what she deems the government's "fanatical belief in private enterprise" and their "suspicions of any action which might be considered Government intervention" (54). Yet her criticism is hardly unjustified. In the spring, thousands of lives were lost because of delays in opening the soup kitchens, and further heavy casualties became inevitable when the government refused to extend the scheme past the harvest, which proved totally inadequate since the amount of potatoes planted was far below the average due to shortage of seed.³³ Moreover, the influence of providentialist thinking was again evident: "No exertion of a government, or, I will add, of private charity", Charles Wood asserted, "can supply a complete remedy for the existing calamity. It is a national visitation, sent by Providence."³⁴

The ostensible success of the soup kitchen scheme caused Trevelyan to proclaim that "the famine was stayed."³⁵ But hunger and disease continued to claim lives, especially as the potato crop was inadequate in 1847 and failed again in 1848. By then, the government had already decided that any further relief was to be a strictly local concern. Under the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act passed in June 1847, the relief of the destitute poor was to be financed by local rather than imperial funds. In practice, this meant that the joint Exchequer of Britain and Ireland established in 1817 was no longer recognized: Ireland was expected to rely on her own resources to provide for the victims of famine. In Woodham-Smith's estimation, the "good intentions" of the government became "increasingly difficult to discern" after the transfer to poor law relief (310, 408). Again, she claims, it was Trevelyan who "took charge" and, under his plan, which was approved by Wood, the Amended Poor Law was "put into effect" (307). Trevelyan held that "we must now try what independent exertion will do" and expressed his conviction that "whatever the difficulties and dangers may be ... nothing but local self government and self support ... hold out any hope of improvement for Ireland" (302). Russell declared that "we must give very little for relief and much for permanent improvement" (304), but the financial crisis of 1847 put a stop to whatever "permanent improvement" was contemplated. As Woodham-Smith sees it, the decision to compel property to

³³ According to Peter Gray, "less than a quarter of the usual amount had been planted" (*Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 285). The fact that a large number of cottiers and small farmers had been forced to consume their seed potatoes in 1846 in order to survive seems to have escaped the government. The Society of Friends alone apparently understood the importance of seed: Woodham-Smith notes that, from September 1847, their Central Relief Committee "considered that distributing seed was the best means of relief" (286).

³⁴ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 268.

³⁵ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 65.

pay for poverty through the mechanism of the Poor Law was precipitated by the determination to punish the Irish landlords who “had done nothing but sit down and howl for English money.” Instead of doing their duty, they had “worked themselves to the brink of ruin and the whole people to the brink of starvation” (297). Thus from now on, proprietors and occupiers of land valued at £4 or above would have to live up to their responsibilities by paying additional tax to provide for the maintenance of the poor. When a similar plan was contemplated in December 1845, Sir James Graham, Home Secretary at the time, had warned that

[i]t could not be expected, that by a compulsory rate, on the basis of the poor rates, introduced suddenly, any large fund could be obtained for the relief of the poor in Ireland during the present scarcity.³⁶

Similarly, George Nicholls, the architect of the Irish Poor Law of 1838, had emphasized that a general famine was “altogether above the powers of a poor law to provide for.”³⁷ By the autumn of 1847, such warnings had apparently been forgotten.

In spite of ample evidence that ruin and starvation had already overtaken a considerable portion of the Irish population, the system of poor law relief was adopted and adhered to. “It was ... an article of faith with the British Government”, Woodham-Smith contends, “that rates could be collected in Ireland if pressure were used; apply the screw with sufficient force and the money would appear” (313). As a result, union after union went bankrupt, especially in 1848-49, as it proved impossible to collect sufficient rates to meet the need for relief, and mortality rates soared again even though the price of foodstuffs had fallen due to large imports. Woodham-Smith notes that on 20 September, Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant, wrote to Charles Wood at the Exchequer:

There are whole districts in Mayo and Donegal and parts of Kerry where the people swarm and are even now starving and where there is no landed proprietor to levy on. He is absent or in Chancery and the estate subdivided into infinitesimally small lots[.]... What is to be done with these hordes? Improve them off the face of the earth, you will say, let them die ... but there is *a certain amount of responsibility* attaching to it. [original emphasis]

Wood, however, “remained unbending in his determination to throw present and future expenditure on Ireland” (313-14). The government seemed equally unbending in spite of doubts expressed by officials in Ireland charged with

³⁶ Quoted in Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, p. 124.

³⁷ Quoted in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 47.

implementing the system as well as by other contemporaries. At the end of September, a vice-guardian, appointed by the government and thus presumably unaffected by Irish opinion, wrote from County Mayo:

There is no doubt whatever that we should be able to work the Poor Law, so as to keep the destitute from starvation, had we the means at our disposal. Then comes the question, where are these means to be found? The government says, "From the rates." Doubtless much may be collected, but it remains to be proved, whether there can be any amount even approaching a sufficiency obtained to satisfy so great a demand.³⁸

Based on his observations while travelling in the west of Ireland during the autumn of 1847, James Hack Tuke concluded that "in a large portion of Connaught, the poor-rate cannot be calculated upon ... as sufficient to meet the wants of the destitute."³⁹ Tuke's opinion was backed up by Jonathan Pim: "Under ordinary circumstances", he wrote,

every electoral division ought to be able to support its own poor; ... but the present calamity places them far beyond the limit of ordinary circumstances. It is a national, an imperial calamity, which must be borne by each locality as far as its resources enable it, and the deficiency should be made up out of the imperial exchequer.⁴⁰

Woodham-Smith is adamant that the government made a great mistake in assuming that sufficient rates could be collected to mitigate a prolonged famine. "[T]o collect rates in Ireland", she asserts, "was not merely difficult – in a large number of districts it was practically impossible" (174). Consequently, Poor Law guardians, especially in the west and south-west, found themselves increasingly unable to find the means to support the steadily growing hordes of destitute persons in their unions. Woodham-Smith refers to a number of unions incapable of coping with the overwhelming demand for relief. Carrick-on-Shannon in County Leitrim was one of them. In mid-July 1847, the Board of Guardians reported that

the union was bankrupt: there were only sufficient provisions to feed the paupers in the workhouse for three days, merchants refused to send in further supplies until they were paid, and it was 'utterly impossible for the Collectors to get in rates sufficient to provide food for the inmates'. (315)

³⁸ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 293.

³⁹ Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Pim, *The Condition and Prospects of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1848), p. 224.

Similarly, the Clifden union in County Galway “was bankrupt”, the workhouse had been closed down, and the “wretched inmates had been expelled” (318). As Woodham-Smith sees it, the result of the transfer to poor law relief was that, at the end of 1847, people were “dying of starvation, both inside the workhouses and outside them”, employment was “non-existent” and the people were “pauperized and wretched as never before” (328). This desperate state of affairs was exacerbated by the “relentless severity in rate collecting”, which “increased evictions, since on holdings valued at £4 and under, the landlord was liable for the rate” (319). What Woodham-Smith fails to mention is that the Gregory clause, introduced by an Irish landlord and virtually unopposed by the Irish members of Parliament⁴¹, greatly added to evictions in 1848-49. Despite the prevailing opinion within the government as well as in the public mind that the landlords had neglected their duties and should henceforth be compelled to shoulder them, the Gregory clause was passed as a concession to those same landlords. (In view of that concession, Mitchel’s perception of a government-landlord conspiracy is perhaps more understandable). The result was a considerable increase in evictions, illegal and otherwise. In many cases, people were turned out of their holdings although they had paid their rent.⁴² For instance, in November 1847, Captain Kennedy reported from the Kilrush union in County Clare that “[a]n immense number of small landholders are under ejectment, or notice to quit, even where the rents have been paid up.”⁴³ Thus as many government officials and other contemporary observers attested, the suffering of the famine-stricken poor was greatly increased by the workings of the Gregory clause.

Yet Woodham-Smith is not inclined to blame the landlords alone. Early on in her book, she claims that “a large number of Irish landlords were helplessly insolvent” by the time the famine struck, and that this was due to

the extravagance of their predecessors, the building of over-large mansions, reckless expenditure on horses, hounds and conviviality, followed by equally reckless borrowing.

Therefore, she asserts, many of them had been brought to a point where, “however desperate the needs of their tenantry, they were powerless to give any help”

⁴¹ The clause was carried by a vote of 119 to 9, with only a few Irish MPs voting against it (Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 102).

⁴² Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 224; Swords, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 331, 350; T.P. O’Neill, “Famine Evictions”, in King (ed.), *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, p. 47.

⁴³ A.E. Kennedy, “Reports and Returns Relating to Evictions in the Kilrush Union”, 25 November 1847.

(63). In considering the putative advantages of the public works, she doubts that the landlords possessed “sufficient funds to pay the rate for relief works assessed on them” (113), a plausible scenario which the government chose not to consider. She admits that “it was impossible to regard Irish landlords, as a class, with sympathy”, but nevertheless concludes that “no effort was made to comprehend their dilemma” and that, therefore, they were “made the scape-goat” (284). She points out that although some landlords clearly evaded their responsibilities, many others proved an exception, and she gives several examples of those who made efforts to help their starving tenants. In her analysis of landlord response, she makes an observation which, although in a different guise, is still pertinent to the inequitable world of today: “The Irish people starved and died in one world, the Irish landowning classes inhabited another. Landlords felt their responsibility was limited” (299). In the final analysis, then, Woodham-Smith is rather ambiguous as to how much blame can be cast on the landlords. In this respect, her interpretation differs from that of many nationalist writers, notably Mitchel (although he, too, seems to be in two minds), Davitt, O’Donovan Rossa and Connolly, all of whom maintained that during the Famine, landlords brought the common people a great deal of suffering. Consequently, her take on the question of landlord responsibility comes closer to that of the revisionists as represented in the Edwards and Williams book than to most nationalist interpreters. In Chapter 6, we shall see how Eugene McCabe explores this question from the viewpoint of his fictional landlord.

The Great Hunger has often been perceived as a nationalist representation of Famine history. Some fairly recent commentators have argued that although Woodham-Smith is not as vehement in her criticism of the British government as Mitchel, she basically vindicates his condemnation of the government and reaffirms his conclusions.⁴⁴ But although she does lay a great deal of blame on the government as well as on individuals like Trevelyan and Wood, this does not necessarily amount to a clear-cut re-affirmation of Mitchel’s indictments. She quotes Mitchel on the question of food exports but does not share his conviction that an embargo would have saved the people from starvation. “[I]t is doubtful”, she argues, “if the starving would have benefited substantially” from such a measure:

⁴⁴ See for example O’Farrell, “Whose Reality?”, p. 4; Graham Davis, “Making History: John Mitchel and the Great Famine”, in Paul Hyland and Neil Sammells (eds), *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion* (London: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 98-115 [101]; Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 146.

The districts where distress was most severe ... produced little but potatoes. Food from other districts would have had to be brought in and distributed. Grain would have had to be milled ... which was a difficult problem. (76)

This conclusion, while rejecting Mitchel's view of the matter, is consistent with that of T.P. O'Neill.⁴⁵ In this instance, then, Woodham-Smith clearly expounds a revisionist rather than a nationalist view. She is also critical of the unwieldy bureaucracy which led to delays in re-starting the relief works in 1846. "It was impossible", she writes,

for a staff which, up to September 30, consisted of only 24 county surveyors, 15 engineers in charge, 39 assistant engineers and 36 inspecting officers to examine, sift and establish works out of a total of a million and a half pounds' worth of applications. (115)

Yet at no point does she suggest, as Mitchel does, that the resulting chaos was contrived by the government as part of a plan to exterminate the Irish people. Rather, it was the "deluge of applications" for work and the "strictness of Treasury control" which caused delays that proved fatal in many instances (126). Her implicit criticism of the inadequacy of wages, the delays in payment and the unfairness of task work (127-28) coincides with that of numerous contemporary observers whose comments and testimonies she frequently cites to convey a sense of the consequences for the starving population. In her appraisal of these matters, Woodham-Smith is no more "nationalist" than T.P. O'Neill, who calls attention to the same flaws in the government's scheme.⁴⁶

Regarding the matter of government responsibility, Woodham-Smith is at her most censorious in appraising the decision to make Irish ratepayers wholly liable for the relief of the destitute. "Making every allowance for the depleted state of the Treasury", she writes,

and bearing in mind the large sums already expended on Irish relief, sums representing many times their value today, it is still hardly possible to explain, or to condone, the British Government's determination to throw the Irish destitute on the local Poor rate. (310)

The pressure of British public opinion, which by this time was strongly against any further public expenditure on Irish relief, would provide at least a partial explanation, but Woodham-Smith does not emphasize that aspect. Instead, she again implies that ignorance and obtuseness among the policymakers prevented them from seeing the impracticability of the measure. Apart from the diffi-

⁴⁵ Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 244.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 228-29.

culty, or impossibility, of collecting sufficient rates, she points to the enormous size of many unions as an obstacle to establishing an efficient system of relief:

No Board of Guardians could conceivably relieve the destitute efficiently and economically in a union of hundreds of thousands of acres. Further, the very large unions were in the distressed districts of Connaught and Munster and contained immense areas of wild, backward, neglected country, without resident landlords or gentry, swarming with 'squatters', miserable wretches living in sod or furze huts and bogholes, penniless and starving. (310)

The fact that problems such as these were overlooked or ignored surely justifies a sceptical attitude to the professedly good intentions of the government. Incorporating abundant citations of contemporary sources, many of them previously unused, Woodham-Smith presents a coherent and convincing narrative of the disastrous results of that final relief measure which affected the Irish poor throughout the remaining years of famine. She concludes that after the transfer to poor law relief, "the behaviour of the British Government is difficult to defend" (408). Such a conclusion can hardly be construed as a vindication of Mitchel, who saw the measure, "the most disastrous of all", as yet another part of the government's plan to exterminate the Irish people. The Poor Laws, he wrote,

were a failure for their professed purpose – that of relieving the famine; but were a complete success for their real purpose – that of uprooting the people from the land, and casting them forth to perish.⁴⁷

Mitchel's insistence on a conspiracy does not rhyme with Woodham-Smith's assertion that the government was not motivated by any conscious wish to destroy the Irish nation. Taken as a whole, her criticism basically amounts to a charge of culpable neglect: the government failed to rectify the adverse effects of their relief policies, a failure which eventually led to mass starvation, death, evictions and emigration. Yet to blame the government and key figures like Trevelyan exclusively is arguably an oversimplification. As Peter Gray has observed, allocating blame for past actions raises serious historical problems because the historian risks "falling into gross anachronism in attempting to pass judgement on long-dead individuals." Nevertheless, Gray argues,

while allowing for an inevitable present-oriented bias on the historian's part, the attempt should be made. The question then arises whether intentions or consequences should be the criteria for judgement. Any neglect of the adverse consequences of policy may be treated as culpable, if it can be shown

⁴⁷ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 211.

that these were public knowledge. Yet it is the active intentions of policy-makers that may be considered more reprehensible. An evaluation of responsibility thus requires an understanding of the debates of the time, and the existence of articulated and feasible alternatives to the policies actually implemented.⁴⁸

Mainly through her extensive use of contemporary sources, Woodham-Smith shows beyond doubt that the adverse effects of government relief policies were public knowledge and that these effects were often ignored by the authorities. She also shows that feasible alternatives were proposed, particularly in 1846 and 1847. For example, Lord Monteagle, supported by Lords Devon and Bessborough, urged the government to allow productive works under the terms of the Labour Rate Act because, as he saw it, spending enormous sums on unprofitable labour was “a fatal mistake” (130). Toward the end of 1846, various plans for ending “the alarming neglect of agriculture” were put forward (148-49), and in early 1847 Russell himself proposed a scheme for distributing seed to tenant farmers (286). All of these proposals were rejected and, Woodham-Smith implies, Trevelyan was the pivotal naysayer. Thus the debates generated both in the official and public domain by proposed as well as adopted relief measures are somewhat imperfectly treated in *The Great Hunger*, since the author tends to over-emphasize Trevelyan’s role in policymaking. But even if Woodham-Smith’s evaluation of responsibility can be criticized for a certain narrowness of perspective, it is not so present-oriented as to warrant a dismissal. I find that, *pace* Lyons, the contemporary context emerges clearly enough to support Woodham-Smith’s conclusion that “the justification of the Government’s actions was expediency, but it is difficult to reconcile expediency with duty and moral principles” (408).

In his review of *The Great Hunger*, Kevin Nowlan, author of the chapter on politics in *The Great Famine*, commended Woodham-Smith for her representation of “a major social disaster”:

She writes vividly and with understanding about the sufferings of the hungry poor in the cruel years between 1845 and 1849. This concentration on the human element, on the horrors of the emigrant ship, the evictions and disease, is perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book. The accounts of social conditions are vigorous and clear and the author is firmly in control of the material relating to these questions.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Gray, “Ideology and the Famine”, in Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Kevin Nowlan, Review of Cecil-Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger*, in *Studia Hibernica*, no. 3, 1963, pp. 210-11 [210].

This positive critique is wholly warranted. Woodham-Smith's emphasis on the plight of the victims and the terrible ravages of famine, largely mediated through eyewitness testimonies, restores the human tragedy which tended to be understated in *The Great Famine* as the central historical reality. Readers are confronted with the immense suffering witnessed by contemporaries in places like Skibbereen and Schull and different parts of counties Clare and Mayo. Nicholas Cummins's report from Skibbereen, published in the *London Times* on Christmas Eve 1846, describing "frightful hunger", famished skeletons "to all appearances dead" from starvation or fever and frozen corpses gnawed by rats, is quoted at length. "These facts", Woodham-Smith notes, "were confirmed by Government witnesses" (named and quoted), one of whom said that "nothing can exceed the deplorable state of this place" (162-63). Earlier that year, a resident of Skibbereen wrote that it was "impossible to exaggerate the misery of the people" (116), and Mr Hughes, the local Commissariat officer, assured Routh that the suffering there "had not been exaggerated" (124). Commander Caffyn, the British captain of a ship bringing supplies to Schull in February 1847, wrote about the awful conditions prevailing in the locality. Accompanied by Dr Traill, the Protestant rector, Caffyn toured the parish to find nothing but "wholesale misery." The details of his account, partly paraphrased and partly quoted by Woodham-Smith (182-83), largely coincide with those in Cummins's report.⁵⁰

In December 1846, the Board of Works inspector for West Clare, Captain Edmond Wynne, reported to Trevelyan from Clare Abbey. "[A]ltho' a man not easily moved", he wrote,

I confess myself unmanned by the intensity and extent of the suffering I witnessed, more especially among the women and little children, crowds of whom were to be seen scattered over the turnip fields like a flock of famishing crows, devouring the raw turnips, mothers half naked, shivering in the snow and sleet[.] ... I am a match for anything else I may meet with here, but this I cannot stand. (154-55)

Alongside the extract from Wynne's letter, Woodham-Smith has inserted a reproduction of a sketch by James Mahony, showing two ragged children scavenging for potatoes in a field in the village of Cahera near Skibbereen in the

⁵⁰ Prior to his visit to Schull, Caffyn had suspected that reports from Ireland had been exaggerated to arouse sympathy, but, he wrote afterwards, "the reality ... is no exaggeration for it does not admit of it – famine exists in a frightful degree with all its horrors." Having read the "awful" report, Trevelyan saw no reason to doubt its reliability, coming as it did from an "officer of undoubted honour and veracity." Quoted in Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 185.



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winter of 1847.⁵¹ This suggests that the sight of “famishing crows” in blighted fields was neither unusual nor confined to a single locality. In January 1847, the British Relief Association appointed Count Strzelecki as agent for counties Donegal, Mayo and Sligo.⁵² Having arrived at Westport, he reported to the Association:

No pen can describe the distress by which I am surrounded[.] ... You may now believe anything which you hear and read, because what I actually see surpasses what I ever read of past and present calamities. (170)

Woodham-Smith notes that increasing destitution was by no means limited to the west and southwest. The Board of Works inspector in Armagh report-

⁵¹ First published in “Sketches in the West of Ireland”, *Illustrated London News*, 20 February 1847.

⁵² According to Woodham-Smith, the mission of “The British Association for the relief of the extreme distress in the remote parishes of Ireland and Scotland” was to relieve those who were “beyond the reach of the Government” by providing food, clothing and fuel (169).

ed that “[m]obs of men and women imploring employment assail you on the road” and that a lot of people had “perished unknown” (180). Reports to the same effect were submitted by officers in counties Tipperary, Westmeath and Monaghan (149). In February, the inspector in Leitrim described “the fearful measure of distress” prevailing there: “Two cartloads of orphans, whose parents had died of starvation”, he wrote, “were turned away from the workhouse yesterday” (181). In response to an inquiry by the Society of Friends, the novelist Maria Edgeworth estimated that in her district of County Longford, there were about 3,000 people in need of relief. Some of them were employed on the public works but could not earn enough to support their families. Others were “incapable of work” and the workhouse was full (169).

The extensive typhus epidemic which erupted in some areas already in the summer of 1846 became long-lasting, and more suffering and death followed in its wake. Woodham-Smith notes that because a large number of workhouses were overcrowded and several unions lacked the means to set up temporary fever hospitals, it became impossible to care for the increasing number of patients. The horrific conditions in congested workhouses and makeshift fever sheds emerge through numerous quotations from doctors’ reports from all over the country (198-201). Doctors sent to inspect various districts by the Board of Health in 1847 confirmed the gravity of the situation. Dr Stephens found the fever hospital at Bantry “appalling, awful, heart-sickening”, and he

‘did not think it possible to exist in a civilized and Christian community.’ Fever patients were lying naked on straw, the living and the dead together. The doctor was ill and no one had been near the hospital for two days. There was no medicine, no drink, no fire; ...the sole attendant was one pauper nurse ‘utterly unfit.’ (200)

Similar conditions were found in Cork and Lurgan, and in some places fever patients could not be accommodated at all. As an example of this, Woodham-Smith cites the Protestant rector of Newport, who reported that “very many [fever] cases are in the open fields without shelter or covering, some by the wayside” (201). As the epidemic began to subside in late 1847, Captain Robert Mann summed up his impressions in a letter to Trevelyan:

A great deal has been written and many an account given of the dreadful sufferings of the poor. Believe me, my dear Sir, the reality in most cases far exceeded description. Indeed none can conceive what it was but those who were in it. (285)

But as Woodham-Smith shows, it was not only the poor who were afflicted by disease. Doctors and clergymen as well as a proportionately large number of the aristocracy also fell prey to the typhus epidemic.

With the transfer to poor law relief, the “dreadful sufferings” continued unabated as the rate of evictions escalated. Tax collectors hounded landowners and substantial farmers, who in turn evicted small tenants in order to escape the liability for poor rates on holdings valued below £4, and proprietors availed themselves of the Gregory clause, legitimately or not, to get rid of smallholders. As an example of the havoc wreaked by mass clearances, Woodham-Smith cites the case of the Walsh estate in a remote part of Erris, County Mayo. The landlord, a Dublin lawyer, who “had taken no part in relief work” and was a rate-defaulter, cleared out three villages on his lands in late December 1847.⁵³ The inhabitants were driven out “in the depth of winter, to exist as best they might” (319). James Hack Tuke visited the Mullet peninsula where these villages were situated in February 1848, and Woodham-Smith quotes from his account of the destruction and the plight of the evicted tenants. Tuke noted that in the village of Mullaghroe, where 102 families were rated in 1845, “only the walls of three houses now stood.” The hamlets of Tiraun and Clogher had met with a similar fate: the inhabitants had been “driven out with the help of troops” and their cabins demolished. Captain Glazebrook, who was in charge of the troops enlisted by Mr Walsh to assist in the evictions, was “disgusted” at what he had witnessed and declared that “the horrors of that wretched place” were beyond description. Amidst the desolation at Mullaghroe, Tuke “saw ‘miserable objects’ lingering helpless and bewildered round the ruins of their homes, while outside their few possessions disintegrated in the rain.” At the temporary “feeding station” established by the Poor Law inspector, Tuke found “more than three hundred persons ... ‘in various stages of fever, starvation and nakedness’”, and the Poor Law inspector informed him that many of the evicted had never reached the station because “they were too ill to crawl out of their hiding places and shelters” (320).⁵⁴

⁵³ In July 1846, the *Mayo Constitution* had commended Walsh for “relieving distress” on his property and “taking benevolent steps in anticipation of apprehended want” (quoted in Hamrock, *The Famine in Mayo*, p. 33). Pondering the reason for Walsh’s turn-about, the Poor Law inspector at Ballina wrote: “I am not aware Mr Walsh has been worse treated by his tenantry than other landlords have been; I presume he has, for I never before saw such wholesale desolation, and I hope I never may again” (quoted in Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 286).

⁵⁴ Tuke’s account of the aftermath of the Walsh evictions is included in a postscript to his pamphlet *A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847*, pp. 61–68. His findings were corroborated by William Hamilton, the Poor Law inspector of Ballina union (see Swords, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 285–86) and by Asenath Nicholson (*Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 116).

The suffering caused by evictions is re-emphasized in Woodham-Smith's account of the clearances in West Clare in 1848-49. During those years, the Kilrush union became notorious for wholesale evictions, details of which became public knowledge through the reports of Captain Kennedy, the Poor Law inspector, and through a series of articles published in the *Illustrated London News* between December 1849 and February 1850. In January 1849, Captain Kennedy stated that "it is beyond a doubt that 13,000 to 15,000 persons have been evicted within the year", and by the end of June at least another 1,800 had been added to that number.⁵⁵ Based on Kennedy's reports, Woodham-Smith paints a stark picture of the human misery prevailing in the union. In the spring of 1848,

the dispossessed occupiers, 'wretched, houseless, helpless,' were wandering about the country, 'scattering disease, destitution and dismay in all directions ... the most awful cases of destitution and suffering ever seen. When the houses are torn down, people live in banks and ditches like animals, until starvation or weather drives them to the workhouse.' (364)

After the potato crop was again lost to blight in late summer 1848, Woodham-Smith notes that "it was hopeless to expect rents to be collected ... and more ruthless clearances resulted." By November,

the evicted 'were swarming all over the union, living in temporary sheds, unfit for human occupation, from which they are daily driven by the inclement weather.' Huts were made by roofing ditches with boughs and sods, or leaning sticks against walls and covering them with turf and furze, and here whole families huddled for shelter. (368)

The above are merely a few examples of the numerous and detailed eyewitness accounts interspersed throughout Woodham-Smith's narrative to convey a sense of the suffering endured by the Irish poor. In the words of Steven Marcus,

Woodham-Smith goes in neither for picturesque detail nor comic-pathetic diversions[.] ... [A]bstract statistics come alive as human beings, as she paradoxically undoes the usual effect of statistics, which is to impersonalize, average out, and distance our response to concrete experience.⁵⁶

Undaunted by the subjectivity and emotiveness which characterize many of these accounts, she lets them speak for themselves. Although there is no mistaking her sympathy for the sufferers, this does not necessarily mean that she

⁵⁵ See Kennedy, "Reports and Returns Relating to Evictions in the Kilrush Union", 22 January and 7 May 1849.

⁵⁶ Marcus, "Hunger and Ideology", in idem., *Representations*, p. 5.

“manipulates [her] readers’ feelings”, as Elizabeth Malcolm claims.⁵⁷ Rather, she enables readers to empathize with the victims, for, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, “the witness tells a story that is a living presentation, and therefore deploys the capacity of the imagination to place the events before our eyes, as if we were there.”⁵⁸ With its emphasis on the victims and its re-examination of the relief efforts and the question of responsibility, *The Great Hunger* is a new departure in Famine historiography. Rather than belligerently reviving the old nationalist orthodoxy, it anticipates the work of post-revisionist historians of the Great Famine.

5.2. Post-revisionist interpretations

5.2.1. Christine Kinealy’s *This Great Calamity*

In her introduction to *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*, Christine Kinealy refers to the polarity in Famine historiography as evinced by “a strong ‘revisionist’ tradition” on the one hand and an emerging challenge to this practice on the other.⁵⁹ Revisionist historians, she claims,

have been anxious to dispel old myths – pathos and emotion have been removed with surgical precision. Controversial issues have been replaced with cautious reasoning[.] ... Most significantly, the suffering and human degradation which accompanied the food shortages have been moved from centre stage ... [and] the crucial role played by the British government and its key agents has also been softened by appeals to view their actions within the context of the period[.] ... Although this revised view of the Famine has raised some interesting and ‘politically correct’ questions, its main contentions are ultimately unconvincing. Too frequently, the starving baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. (xviii-xix)

Starting from the contention that the Famine “was neither inevitable nor unavoidable” (xv), Kinealy sets out to reassess “the causes and impact” of the catastrophe and to re-evaluate “the management of the official response” (xix). Her objective is to revise the revisionists, and her conclusions amount to an indictment of the Westminster government for their failure to avert the worst

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Malcolm, “‘On Fire’: *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*”, in *New Hibernia Review*, vol.12, no.4 (Winter 2008), pp. 143-49 [146].

⁵⁸ “Imagination, Testimony and Trust: A dialogue with Paul Ricoeur”, in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary debates in philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 12-17 [16].

⁵⁹ Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. xvi. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

consequences of the famine. According to Joanna Bourke, this charge is “the most controversial aspect” of Kinealy’s book. Placing the blame “firmly in the laps of policy-makers within Britain” is “an interesting argument”, Bourke allows, but “the problem of separating out the actual results ... from the intended effects is not sustained.” Consequently, in Bourke’s view, Kinealy’s accusation “smacks too much of the discredited ‘genocide’ argument.” Adding that *This Great Calamity* is “the clearest account we have” of the “anti-revisionist” viewpoint, Bourke seems to imply that Kinealy’s work risks collapsing the Famine back into its nationalist construct.⁶⁰ Another reviewer who seems to detect the ghost of nationalist Famine history in Kinealy’s evaluation of government response is Mary Daly. As she sees it, Kinealy “appears to favour a conspiracy theory”, since she writes that

“a group of officials and their non-elected advisors were able to dominate government policy ... [and] to manipulate a theory of free enterprise, thus allowing a massive social injustice to be perpetrated within a part of the United Kingdom.”⁶¹

Even a post-revisionist like Peter Gray finds that Kinealy does not fully explain the reasons for the government’s failure because her focus on administrative issues precludes a satisfactory analysis of the role of ideology and political motivation in the process of determining policy. As Gray sees it, Kinealy’s “superficial treatment” of these issues

leads to elisions in many important aspects of Famine policy – the formulation and reception of policy measures other than those actually implemented, the nature and significance of a ‘reconstructive agenda’ behind relief policy, and the balance between political calculations and ideological imperatives.⁶²

Other reviewers have been less critical. The historian K. Theodore Hoppen finds that Kinealy’s study “lends authority” to the claim that the British government could have done more to alleviate the consequences of recurring potato blights. She has “worked through a significant proportion of the relevant evidence”, he writes, “and presents conclusions which substantially revise the

⁶⁰ Joanna Bourke, “A blighted nation starved of help”, *Times Higher Education*, 21 July 1995, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/a-blighted-nation-starved-of-help/161594>. article (17 April 2009).

⁶¹ Mary Daly, “Historians and the Famine: a beleaguered species?”, *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xxx, no. 120 (1997), pp. 591-601 [592]. The quote is taken from Kinealy’s concluding chapter, p. 359.

⁶² Peter Gray, “Famine Fields”, *Bullán*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1998), pp. 149-50.

revisionists.”⁶³ Similarly, S.J. Connolly holds that *This Great Calamity* offers “a fresh, thoroughly-documented, and convincing re-examination of government policy and its implementation” which “powerfully confirms” the reservations of Joel Mokyr, James Donnelly and Cormac Ó Gráda regarding the “far too indulgent” assessment of government responsibility offered by the authors of *The Great Famine*.⁶⁴ Chris Morash finds that Kinealy rejects “the old Mitchelite polemic” of genocide, but that she equally rejects the notions that the Famine was inevitable and that it “could not have been alleviated to a greater extent.” Her narrative, Morash notes, is “far from dispassionate”, yet it “relies ... on quantitative econometric methods of analysis.” What Kinealy attempts in her book, then, is a “synthesis of the ‘evocative’ with the ‘scholarly’”, a blend of *The Great Hunger* and *The Great Famine*.⁶⁵ And in spite of his reservations regarding Kinealy’s “superficial treatment” of ideological issues and political motives, Peter Gray concedes that she “convincingly indict[s] government for the inadequacies of relief policy.”⁶⁶

According to Graham Davis, Mitchel’s notion of starvation amidst plenty is a “standard theme” in several works on the Famine, including *This Great Calamity*.⁶⁷ Yet Kinealy does not harp on the issue of food exports to the same extent that Mitchel does, nor does she explicitly claim that famine could have been altogether averted by prohibiting exports.⁶⁸ Even so, she insists that after the second potato failure in 1846 “a short-term solution such as placing a temporary embargo on exports ... could have been introduced to provide immediate assistance to Ireland” (89). This point was made already in 1956 by T.P. O’Neill and in 1976 by Austin Bourke, both of whom admitted that temporarily retaining Irish produce for domestic consumption would have helped to close the “starvation gap” between the return of the blight in August 1846 and the arrival of substantial Indian corn supplies in the early months of 1847. Nevertheless, they had both concluded that, owing to economic and ideological

⁶³ K. Theodore Hoppen, Review of Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, in *History*, vol. 81, no. 263 (1996), pp. 481-82.

⁶⁴ S.J. Connolly, “Revisions Revised? New Work on the Irish Famine”, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1996), pp. 205-16 [211].

⁶⁵ Chris Morash, “Entering the Abyss”, *The Irish Review*, no. 17/18, (1995), pp. 175-79 [177].

⁶⁶ Gray, “Famine Fields”, p. 149.

⁶⁷ Graham Davis, “The Historiography of the Irish Famine”, in Patrick O’Sullivan (ed.), *The Irish Worldwide: History, Heritage, Identity*, Volume 6: *The Meaning of the Famine* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), pp. 15-39 [17].

⁶⁸ In a later work, however, Kinealy advances the Mitchelite argument that sufficient food was produced during the Famine to feed the Irish population. See *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, p. 25.

impediments, such a measure was out of the question at the time.⁶⁹ Kinealy allows that an embargo on exports would have been a “radical solution” (89), but she believes it would have been possible. Referring specifically to the subsistence crisis of 1782-84, she argues that closing the ports “in order to keep home-grown food for domestic consumption had on earlier occasions proved to be an effective way of staving off famine” (354). This line of argument assumes that what was done in 1782 could, and should, also have been done in 1846. It can of course be argued that a government like Russell’s, ideologically committed to free trade, would hardly see the matter in such an uncomplicated light. But there is still the moral aspect of the issue to be considered: can the exportation of food from a country afflicted by famine be justified by invoking the principles of free trade? At the time, many contemporary observers from politicians, Irish as well as English, to journalists, charity workers and priests, did not think so. Most historians of the Famine have admitted that exporting food while people were dying of starvation was, at the very least, anomalous. My own view of this matter coincides with that of Peter Gray: “The moral case against the export of food from destitute districts is unanswerable.”⁷⁰

Kinealy finds the British government almost entirely responsible for the deepening crisis following the total failure of the potato crop in 1846:

A general lack of anticipation and readiness to tackle a greatly increased scale of need was evident. Yet, as awareness grew, there was no commensurate response from the government[.] ... [T]he tardy, frugal, short-sighted and ideologically-bound policies adopted by the Whig administration made inevitable the slide from distress to the national calamity of famine. (71)

Like Woodham-Smith, she highlights the government’s failure to import sufficient food in time to prevent increasing starvation and their refusal to open the food depots earlier than the fixed date, in spite of repeated exhortations from relief committees and officials in Ireland to do so. She also shows how the decision not to interfere with private trade was met with scepticism by many contemporaries, such as the landowner in Co. Down who felt that

[t]he government have shown a great want of foresight in not laying up stores and depots of grain through the country, owing to which I fear, many thousands in the south and west will perish from starvation. (80)

⁶⁹ Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 244; Austin Bourke, “The Irish Grain Trade”, 1839-48 [1976], in idem., *‘The Visitation of God’? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), p. 165.

⁷⁰ Peter Gray, Review of Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, in *History Ireland*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2002), pp. 49-51 [50].

Similarly, former Home Secretary Sir James Graham believed that the government had underestimated “the real extent and magnitude of the Irish difficulty” which, he asserted, could not “be met by measures within the strict rule of economic science.” Misgivings such as these, Kinealy observes,

did not deter the faith of a number of members of the government in their policy of non-interference, and the high prices and scarcity which had resulted. Nor was this faith shaken by numerous accusations that the Irish merchants contributed to this hardship by charging high prices for food-stuffs. (80)

Margaret Crawford has argued that it is “simply anachronistic” to believe that a government committed to free trade “could have interfered with private markets.”⁷¹ Yet contemporary opinions suggest otherwise and, as Kinealy has argued elsewhere, “there was no legal or practical obstacle” to the government entering the market in 1846. The only impediment, she maintains, “was an ideological one.”⁷²

There are further echoes of Woodham-Smith in Kinealy’s evaluation of the role played by the Treasury in matters of relief. The Treasury, and particularly Trevelyan, emerge as the most uncompromising advocates of minimal state intervention. Trevelyan, she writes, “was a vociferous defender of both the private traders and policies of the government” (81), and his role in “all decisions in relation to the provision of relief ... went far beyond that of a neutral administrator of public finances.” She ascribes his growing influence during the Famine years partly to his “enthusiasm, thoroughness and high level of personal involvement” (43), partly to Russell’s weakness as a leader and the mounting “internal disarray of the Whig party” (276). Gradually, Trevelyan took on the role of “commander-in-chief of Irish distress”, and by 1847 he was “firmly entrenched” in that role, “especially as no one within the British government expressed any interest in removing the mantle from him” (227). Kinealy’s image of Trevelyan as “commander-in-chief” comes very close to Woodham-Smith’s “virtual dictator of relief”, suggesting a high level of personal responsibility. In her conclusion, Kinealy qualifies that implication, declaring that “no one person can be blamed for the deficiencies of the relief policies.” Even so, she maintains,

Trevelyan perhaps more than any other individual represented a system of response which increasingly was a mixture of minimal relief, punitive qualifying criteria, and social reform. (350)

⁷¹ Margaret Crawford, “Food and Famine”, in Pórtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine*, pp. 60-73 [64].

⁷² Christine Kinealy, Letter to the Editor, *Irish Times*, 2 June 1995.

Strictly adhering to this system, the Treasury became “the guardian of the relief purse” as well as “the oracle of all wisdom regarding Ireland” in the eyes of members of the government (349). Throughout her analysis of the relief administration, Kinealy emphasizes what she sees as the great influence of the Treasury. “No other organization”, she concludes, “played such a sustained role ... in the affairs of Ireland.” It did so, she suggests, with the approval of the government and, therefore, “it was perhaps inevitable that the need to ‘balance the books’ ... should at times overshadow the need to provide adequate relief” (350). Her detailed reconstruction of the workings of the Treasury and its often turbulent relations with relief officials and Poor Law Commissioners in Ireland effectively supports this conclusion.

Kinealy’s analysis of the administration of relief is both thorough and largely convincing in its substantiation of her conclusion that “the response of the British government to the Famine was inadequate in terms of humanitarian criteria” (359). Assessing the public works scheme as it was implemented under the terms of the Labour Rate Act, she explains how increased centralization in the administration of the works led to bureaucracy on such a scale that the Board of Works staff had to be significantly augmented. This meant additional expenses, most of which had to be met by the local baronies. She also points out that bureaucratic procedures caused delays in commencing the works and in paying out wages due to the workers – a point which had already been made by Thomas O’Neill in *The Great Famine* and repeated, with more emphasis, by Woodham-Smith in *The Great Hunger*. For Kinealy, however, the most deplorable aspect of the public works scheme was the inadequacy of wages after payment based on task work was introduced. She points out that “only those who were healthy and strong” could benefit from a system of payment by results, and that because of the soaring price of food, it became impossible for many labourers to earn even a subsistence wage:

Even allowing an average wage of 1s per day for a six day week, this meant that a family, which could consist of a man, his wife and four or five children, had to survive on 2 lbs of corn each day[.] ... What was intended to be a subsistence wage had, in fact, deteriorated into a starvation wage[.] ... As the labourers became weaker and more debilitated, so they were less capable of performing enough task work to earn an adequate day’s wage. (93)

As noted earlier, numerous reports by contemporaries who witnessed the increasingly desperate situation of the poor at first hand indicated that the public works scheme was a failure, and Kinealy provides quotations from some

of these reports. Yet it was not until the end of 1846, when many workhouses were full to overflowing and deaths from starvation and fever mounting, that “even the most ardent supporters of the public works” like Trevelyan and Jones, the chairman of the Board of Works, were ready to admit that the measure “had failed in the most basic requirement of all, that is, providing a distressed people with food” (100-01). And even then, they did not admit that the government was in any way party to the ultimate failure. Instead, they blamed the local relief committees and the landlords. The committees, Jones claimed, were only interested in “getting as many persons employed as possible” (103), and it was commonly perceived that the Irish landlords had not “made sufficient effort to help the distressed people” (104). As the government saw it, the failure was simply due to the “unexpected magnitude of the calamity” (136).

In December 1846, Henry Labouchere, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, wrote to the Prime Minister:

The workhouses are full and the people are turned away to perish. It is impossible to allow this state of things to continue without making some effectual effort to relieve it. The mortality in the workhouses is rapidly increasing, both from the crowded state of the unions and the exhausted state in which the applicants are received. (118)

Kinealy shows that Labouchere was far from alone in calling for government intervention, but despite ample evidence of great distress, the government was reluctant to adopt any new relief policy that would go “against current economic orthodoxies” or “upset the powerful lobby” that disapproved of extending additional assistance to Ireland (119-20). Eventually, Russell persuaded his cabinet to adopt a measure which was “necessarily of a nature contrary to all sound principles” – the distribution of gratuitous food to the destitute in soup kitchens set up by the government. But like Woodham-Smith, Kinealy identifies several negative aspects of the soup kitchen scheme. She describes the “rigid and cumbersome bureaucratic infrastructure” which was “created to ensure strict financial accounting at all levels.” This rigorous adherence to official procedures, she remarks,

undoubtedly contributed to delays in the introduction of the new system of relief and consequently ensured the continuance of high levels of mortality throughout April and May 1847. (139)

In order to receive advances of money from the government, the local relief committees were required to present estimates of the amount needed with “a

full justification of the expense to be incurred.”⁷³ In June 1847, Fr. James Brown of Ballintubber, County Mayo, wrote:

We are betrayed by government ... We have sent up our estimates to government and were to be relieved within four days. Fourteen days have passed and no relief. I procured meal for £60 on my own credit. It is all gone ... Our dead are buried without coffins, and a parish once of 600 families is now reduced to sixty.⁷⁴

In May, R.M. Bromley, the accountant to the Relief Commission, stated that the estimates from the localities were

with scarcely an exception, laid before the Committee within three days of their receipt in office – the far greater majority of them on the following day. Generally the same day on which the estimates have been approved of, His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant has been moved to issue his warrants to the Board of Guardians for paying over the amounts of the same to the treasurer of the Finance Committee of the Union.⁷⁵

Fr. Brown’s complaint suggests that there were longer delays in approving estimates and paying out advances than the accountant was prepared to admit. Or maybe the Ballintubber relief committee had failed to provide “a full justification” for their application? The central authorities often blamed the local committees for the delays as well as for being “too liberal in the provision of relief.” But Kinealy’s own verdict is that the committees “provided a convenient scapegoat for any deficiencies” in the soup kitchen scheme (142). What she seems to imply, then, is that the government was no more inclined to shoulder the responsibility for the defects of this system of relief than for those of the previous one, even though her overall assessment here is somewhat hedged:

In the short term, there is no doubt that soup kitchens did provide an effective form of relief to a massive number of persons. In the longer term, however, it *may* have served to exacerbate some of the shortcomings of the various relief systems: it *probably* further weakened the health of an already debilitated people and increased the financial burden on the already heavily burdened Irish taxpayers on the eve of the transfer to Poor Law relief. (138) [emphasis added]

If Kinealy finds at least some aspects of the soup kitchen project commendable, the case is very different when she evaluates the transfer to poor law relief in

⁷³ Commission on Relief, *Distress (Ireland): First Report of the Relief Commissioners* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1847), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Ó Cathaoir, *Famine Diary*, p. 122.

⁷⁵ Commission on Relief, *Distress (Ireland): Second Report of the Relief Commissioners* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1847), p. 21.

the autumn of 1847. Her first reference to the new policy suggests that there was no evil intent on the part of the government; the objective was a policy that would

facilitate change within Ireland, rather than perpetuate the existing faults evident in Irish society. Leading members of the Whig administration favoured a relief policy that would increase self-reliance of the people and force the landlords to realise that property had its duties as well as its rights. The Poor Law, with its emphasis on local chargeability and union responsibility, was regarded as an ideal mechanism for facilitating these changes. (134)

But as Kinealy sees it, it should have been obvious that poor law relief contingent on local taxation could not meet the demands of widespread destitution:

The fact that the Poor Law was proving unequal to the demands made on it in the early part of 1847 – when officially it was still playing a subsidiary role in the provision of relief – did not deter the government from a determination to make it the primary agency for providing relief following the harvest of that year[.] ... In pursuing this policy, the government chose to ignore the fact that some Poor Law unions were already facing bankruptcy. (134-35)

Her exhaustive analysis of the consequences of this policy leaves no doubt that it was misguided, even if not intentionally damaging. She emphasizes that, already in the early stages, a majority of the Poor Law inspectors and workhouse guardians were convinced that even if it were possible to collect the stipulated amount of rates in the various localities, they would not be sufficient to provide large-scale relief. Yet the government, and especially the Treasury, held fast to their determination to make relief a local concern. “The divide in opinion on how the official response to relief should be handled”, Kinealy writes,

meant that there was a distancing between the Treasury in London and relief officials in Ireland, to the increasing frustration and despair of the latter who were unable to match their policy prescriptions with the level of assistance that they believed to be necessary. (231)

Matching policy regulations with the enormous demand for relief became even more difficult, particularly in the distressed unions in the west, after the introduction of the Gregory clause. Evictions escalated and the dispossessed sought refuge in already overcrowded workhouses. Kinealy notes that some people saw the clause as “the salvation of the property of the country” while others perceived it as “draconian” and feared that “it would merely contribute further to the general destitution” (220). As her analysis demonstrates, the latter inference proved well founded. She gives several examples of landlords who used the Gregory clause to get rid of their cottiers and small tenants, thus

evading the liability for poor rates on holdings valued at £4 or less. These evictions “added to the problems facing local guardians” and to the “suffering and privation” experienced by the affected populace (223). And yet Kinealy is rather sparing in her criticism of evicting landlords. While acknowledging the “occasional” ruthlessness and illegality of evictions, as evidenced for example by the mass clearances in Kilrush union, she believes that “generalisations about the role of landlords should be made with caution.” Following the transfer to poor law relief, “more demands were placed upon the taxpayers” and, consequently, there was “a discernible hardening in the attitudes of landlords” which led to a sharp increase in evictions (348). Lord Lucan of County Mayo is named as a case in point. In October 1846, he paid the expenses of the Castlebar union workhouse for the whole month when, because of unpaid debts, the contractors refused to supply further provisions. This early generosity, Kinealy notes, was overshadowed by Lucan’s subsequent large-scale evictions which “earned him national notoriety and enduring opprobrium” (116). A turn-about such as Lucan’s, from benevolence to apparent callousness, indicated that the “moral obligation between landlords and tenants” was highly “vulnerable to years of distress and spiralling taxation” (348). Thus Kinealy finds that the increasing burden of poor rates and the Gregory clause constituted the main incentives for evictions. The poor rates “placed an especially heavy burden on landlords whose estates were subdivided into very small holdings” (358), and “a solution to the financial difficulties of some landlords was to evict tenants” who occupied such holdings. (190). But as so many contemporaries pointed out, the proprietors, however “vulnerable”, still had a moral obligation towards their tenants – a responsibility that was too often overshadowed by self-interest.

Kinealy admits that many landlords took advantage of the prevailing distress “to go beyond the law and evict at will” (226), but she does not blame them directly. Instead, as Mary Daly has observed, she represents them as “passive victims of government policy.”⁷⁶ As Kinealy sees it, the government rather than the landlords was ultimately responsible for the adverse effects of the Poor Law Amendment and the Gregory clause which

sharpened the developing contrast between those whose main motivation was to tackle social distress and those who viewed the distress as an opportunity to bring about a measure of economic restructuring. The latter’s concern, unofficially expressed by some leading members of the government and the Treasury, was to increase the size of agricultural holdings and introduce new capital into Ireland.

⁷⁶ Daly, “Historians and the Famine”, p. 592.

The objective of economic change “encouraged a policy of minimal intervention” which, in collusion with the Gregory clause, facilitated the fusion of small holdings. These policies, she maintains, amounted to

a clear instance of economic opportunism: of achieving a perceived benefit, the social cost of which was paid by the destitute[.] ... The Quarter Acre Clause represented de facto a dogmatic concern to place the integrity of public finance and socio-economic engineering above the human consequences of famine.(226-27)

This argument contradicts the revisionist position as expounded by Mary Daly that evictions were not the objective of government policy.⁷⁷ Yet in arguing their respective cases, both historians overlook some significant points: Daly omits to mention that the government never intervened to stop evictions, and Kinealy seems to forget, or at least downplay, the fact that even before the famine struck, many landlords had begun clearing their estates of cottiers and smallholders to make way for the more lucrative business of cattle-grazing.

Kinealy’s view that the government was ultimately responsible for the dispossession of smallholders evokes Mitchel’s assertion that it was “strictly in accordance with British policy” that a vast number of Irish people should be left “landless and homeless.”⁷⁸ But whereas Mitchel finds the rationale behind this to be a simple desire on the part of “Englishmen” to “thin out [the] multitudinous Celts,”⁷⁹ Kinealy identifies the more specific motive of social and economic change which meant that long-term considerations took precedence over short-term efforts to relieve the starving and dying population. The British government, she argues, saw the famine as the perfect opportunity to effect this change, and their policies, especially after the transfer to poor law relief in 1847, were devised as a means to that end:

The social and economic dislocation evident during the years of distress was regarded as an opportunity to bring about changes in the Irish economy and facilitate its transformation into a more streamlined capitalist society. The Quarter-Acre clause, the workhouse test, and the burden of poor rates were some of the means by which the desired changes were to be effected. Eviction, emigration and high mortality ... were part of the price to be paid. For the British government and some of its agents ... this price did not appear to be too high. (295)

⁷⁷ Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*, p. 112.

⁷⁸ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 138.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

As Kinealy construes it, this perceived opportunity was the impetus behind a putative “hidden agenda” of reform:

The government and its agents were not willing to admit openly that the suffering of many people in Ireland, and the consequent high levels of mortality and emigration, was being employed to achieve other purposes. (357)

This argument convinces up to a point. Kinealy’s analysis of the various relief schemes amply supports a conclusion that they failed to provide effective humanitarian aid, and that at least some of them were devised and implemented with a view to long-term change in Irish society. But to claim that the government’s reformatory aspirations were virtually covert is surely questionable. As Peter Gray demonstrates in his book *Famine, Land and Politics*, there was nothing very “hidden” about their preoccupation with Ireland’s regeneration. The policy failure, Gray concludes,

was due in large measure to the success of the dominant faction in the government in prioritizing [an] ideologically-driven agenda – that of grasping the heaven-sent ‘opportunity’ of famine to deconstruct Irish society and rebuild it anew. Liberal moralists were prepared to play a deadly game of brinkmanship in their campaign to impose a capitalist cultural revolution on the Irish. Their intention ... was the fruit of a powerful social ideology that combined a providentialist theodicy of ‘natural laws’ with a radicalized and ‘optimistic’ version of liberal political economy.⁸⁰

An analysis such as Gray’s of this ideological context does much to explain the motives behind the reconstructive agenda and of how they shaped relief policies. Kinealy’s almost exclusive focus on the relief administration, on the other hand, does not allow much scope for this particular aspect of the Famine story. Consequently, she pays the significant role of moralist-providentialist thinking in formulating policy relatively little attention. Both historians do agree on one crucial point: the government refused to concede that their regenerative aim as reflected in the policies adopted from 1847 onward greatly aggravated the already desperate situation of the Irish poor. But because Kinealy interprets this refusal as an apparent indication of the covertness of the government’s intentions, it is not surprising that some critics should find that her inference smacks too much of the genocide argument. Be that as it may, her overall analysis of the relief effort lends credence to her verdict that the government’s response was

cautious, measured and frequently parsimonious, both with regard to immediate need and in relation to the long-term welfare of that portion of the

⁸⁰ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 331.

population whose livelihood had been wiped out by successive years of potato blight. (352)

As noted earlier, Kinealy finds that revisionist historians have downplayed the suffering and degradation of the victims, the aspect of the Famine story she feels should take centre stage. This raises the question of whether *This Great Calamity* manages to restore the perspective of the victims to what the author deems its rightful place. Reviewers of the book have held divergent views on this matter. According to James Kelly, one of the strengths of the book is that “it does not lose sight of the human victims whose ill-fate is the essence of that grievous crisis.”⁸¹ By contrast, Angela Bourke remarks that “[f]or a book that attempts to provide a less sanitised version of the famine, there is little here that will pull the heart strings”, and this, she feels, “is to its credit.”⁸² As Chris Morash sees it,

Kinealy concentrates on the operation of the Poor Law and other relief mechanisms to such an extent that at times the story of the Famine becomes almost exclusively the story of the relief effort. For long stretches of the book, it is difficult not to wish for more frequent interventions from those on the receiving end of the soup ladle.⁸³

I am inclined to agree with Morash, and yet James Kelly is surely right in that the victims are by no means disregarded in *This Great Calamity*. Like Woodham-Smith, Kinealy uses contemporary accounts to describe the effects of hunger and disease. She touches on the dreadful state of the poor in Skibbereen and surrounding districts with a quote from the *Cork Examiner*, the report of a government inspector and a description of a burial scene

in which the dead bodies were emptied into a pit in the ground from a shell coffin which was to be used again. The graves were so shallow that ‘a few scrapes of a shovel soon laid bare the abdomen of the one that was uppermost’. (124)

By 1847, abandoned corpses in the streets of towns and villages in the west “had become a frequent sight” (172). Kinealy quotes a visitor in Tralee, Co. Kerry, who wrote:

[T]here is a child about five years old lying dead in the main street of Tralee opposite the windows of the principal hotel, and the remains have lain there several hours on a few stones by the side of a footway like a dead dog.

⁸¹ James Kelly, Review of Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, in *Studia Hibernica*, no. 29 (1995-97), pp. 237-41 [238].

⁸² Bourke, “A blighted nation starved of help”, p.2.

⁸³ Morash, “Entering the Abyss”, p. 178.

She also observes that “reports of dogs eating the flesh of dead bodies became commonplace” that year (173).

References to the reports of James Hack Tuke of the Society of Friends convey a sense of the misery endured by starving people in crowded, unheated cabins. In December 1846,

Tuke visited some of the homes of the poor [in north Donegal] and was shocked by the scenes that he witnessed. Not only were the people without food, but they could not afford turf for a small fire which, due to heavy falls of snow, was especially necessary[.] ... [He] visited one small cabin not more than twelve feet square, in which seventeen persons lived including ‘two or three half-naked children.’ (125)

In many cases, people who had managed to secure a place in the workhouse did not fare much better. The records of Poor Law unions provide glimpses of the condition of workhouse inmates. In 1847,

[t]he Galway guardians described the applicants for relief to their workhouse as being ‘living skeletons’. In the Gort workhouse ... one quarter of inmates were all sick, mostly suffering from fever or dysentery[.] ... In many workhouses, the rate of mortality was high, which the Medical Officers usually attributed to the debilitated state in which the people entered them. (122)

Kinealy makes extensive use of these records, but primarily in the attempt to demonstrate how, especially after the transfer to poor law relief, government policies significantly exacerbated the financial difficulties of the unions and led to further deterioration in workhouse conditions during the subsequent years of distress.

The hardship endured by the labourers on the public works is given relatively little attention. Kinealy notes that their wages were inadequate and sometimes greatly delayed, that task work put weak and infirm workers at a disadvantage and that, owing to the illness or death of the main provider of a family, increasing numbers of women and children were forced onto the works. What all this meant in terms of human suffering is largely left for readers to infer. Nevertheless, the resulting high rate of mortality is spelt out:

Mortality was particularly severe in the first months of 1847[.] ... This peak coincided with public works being used as the main vehicle for relief and is a clear testament to the failure of this system. (169)

Similarly, Kinealy points out that the delays in opening soup kitchens ensured continued high levels of mortality and that the food portions distributed were meagre and nutritionally deficient. But although she mentions the fact that

people “did not like the indignity of receiving cooked food” (146), her readers learn nothing of how this was manifested (other than in scattered, often violent protests) or of what took place at the distribution centres. Based on his research in the folklore archive, Roger McHugh describes a typical scene around the soup boilers where crowds of hungry people gathered with “their noggins in their hands”, waiting for their name or number to be called:

Often hunger could be too strong for them and the strong would shove aside the weak ... or rush frantically at the boiler and get badly scalded by plunging their noggins into it[.] ... Once served with their pint of free soup, people would hurry off ... or, if they were too weak to carry home their share, would stretch themselves on the ground and lap it up.⁸⁴

A. M. Sullivan recalled similar scenes in Dublin:

Around these boilers on the roadside there daily moaned and shrieked and fought and scuffled crowds of gaunt, cadaverous creatures that once had been men and women made in the image of God. The feeding of dogs in a kennel was far more decent and orderly.⁸⁵

Descriptions like these powerfully convey the indignity and humiliation the starving people had to endure in their attempt to survive, but they are absent from the pages of *This Great Calamity*.

Although Kinealy observes that evictions caused a great deal of suffering and privation, she does not offer readers much in terms of descriptive examples. She mentions the case of the Walsh evictions in County Mayo, the devastating impact of which was so elaborately described by James Hack Tuke. Kinealy confines herself to a short comment by quoting the local Poor Law inspector:

The impact of the evictions on the residents was that ‘some were in their graves, others under ditches; others begging shelter from house to house, and plundering whatever they could lay their hands on.’ (223)

The illegal evictions of twenty-three families on Lord Lucan’s estate in the Swinford union is also duly recorded, but there is nothing about the subsequent privations of these families.⁸⁶ As for the large-scale clearances in the Kiltrush union, Kinealy merely notes that “in the six-month period from July to December 1848, 6,090 people were evicted from their holdings” and that these people did not “even possess the means with which to emigrate.” These evictions were described

⁸⁴ McHugh, “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 408-09.

⁸⁵ Sullivan, *New Ireland*, pp. 129-30.

⁸⁶ See Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 331, for reports on these evictions and the fate of the evicted.

as “inhuman” acts by the local Poor Law inspector, Captain Kennedy, and they led to increasing pressure on the union workhouse (235-36). Kinealy quotes one of Kennedy’s numerous reports on the circumstances and condition of the dispossessed (288), but on the whole, she reduces these people to statistics in a table (218) citing the number of families evicted between 1847 and 1851. As Mitchel proposed, then, imagination must complete the picture of misery. Again, since Kinealy’s focus is on the system of poor law relief and the government’s accountability for its failure, the plight of the victims tends to be overshadowed by extended analyses of the seemingly unresolvable problems of the relief administration.

Eviction was not the only dire consequence of the Gregory clause. A great deal of misery resulted from uncertainties and arbitrary construals of its implementation in regard to the surrender of land. Lord Sligo called attention to this problem in December 1847. In a letter to the Under-Secretary, Thomas Redington, he asked:

If a tenant offers possession to his landlord, agent or bailiff, but such an offer is not accepted, is such a tenant barred from receiving outdoor relief? If the tenant offers possession of all except a quarter of an acre, is he barred from relief?

Lord Sligo’s inquiry was prompted by the case of a tenant on the Earl of Lucan’s estate which he apparently found indefensible:

A tenant, named Woods, offered possession to [the] bailiff of the Earl of Lucan, who refused it. The relieving officer declared that Woods, being still in possession of more than a quarter acre, could not receive outdoor relief[.] ... Cases like [this] are most pressing and to postpone relief for a week might be a sentence of death.⁸⁷

Occurrences like this were quite common in the distressed unions of the west, and Kinealy refers to one of them which concerned a widow with six children who was denied relief by the local board of guardians. An investigation following her death stated that she

went to obtain a hearing at the Board-room on the 27 December, going a distance of 27 miles in sleet, storm and rain; failed to get a hearing; went with a like result on the 5 January, when her case was brought before the chairman by an ex-officio guardian, who mentioned the fact of her having buried her child Bridget without a coffin on Christmas Eve at night, unassisted, in a snow-storm[.] ... The chairman refused all evidence being tendered ... this poor widow could only reach home when [*sic*] she found her son Michael dead from hunger. (222)

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

The reason for the chairman's refusal was the information given by the bailiff on Sir Robert Palmer's estate, where the widow lived, to the effect that she held two and a half acres of land and, therefore, was not eligible for outdoor relief. The investigation revealed that the bailiff's allegation was false and had been made "to force the woman to give up all claim to her home" (222). The cruel fate of the widow Catherine Murray, then, must serve as the sole testimony to the numerous injustices perpetrated under the cover of the Gregory clause.

Having considered Kinealy's treatment of the victims, I must agree with Morash's caveat that they are somewhat sketchily represented, particularly in view of her introductory remark that the suffering has been moved from centre stage by revisionist historians. That comment surely suggests an intention to rectify the ostensible negligence of victims in earlier histories of the Famine. If so, *This Great Calamity* is not quite up to par. By and large, the scholarly takes precedence over the evocative, and this does not promote a full appreciation of the human dimension of the catastrophe. Melissa Fegan has made the, in my view ill-considered, suggestion that "historiography [is] a medium that seems unsuited" to the vivid portrayal of the suffering endured by the starving.⁸⁸ Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*, for one, clearly gives the lie to this proposition. And even though, in my view, Kinealy could have put greater emphasis on the famine victims, *This Great Calamity*, too, demonstrates that historiographic conventions need not preclude the inescapably affecting representation of suffering. But perhaps even a professed post-revisionist like Kinealy is still a bit wary of engaging with "emotional" material in order to avoid being branded a sentimentalist. Or is it that, although there seems to be no reason why a history of the Famine should not fully address its tragic aspects, historians nevertheless tend to keep the encounter with death at a distance? As we shall see, Eugene McCabe puts that encounter centre stage in his fictional representation of the Famine.

5.2.2. James S. Donnelly's *The Great Irish Potato Famine*

When Christine Kinealy's book appeared in 1994, the new trend which questioned the prevalent revisionist interpretation of the Great Famine had already been in evidence for some time. One of the earliest exponents of this post-revisionist approach was the American historian James S. Donnelly, Jr., who contributed a set of chapters on the Famine to Volume V of *A New History of Ireland*, edited by W.E. Vaughan and published by Clarendon Press in 1989. Dealing with

⁸⁸ Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine*, p. 15.

the political, administrative, economic, and social aspects of the Famine, Donnelly's essays provided a thorough analytic narrative of the period, and some of his conclusions were at odds with the revisionist view. Chiefly owing to the prohibitive price of the *New History* volume, Donnelly's work did not reach a broad readership, yet it proved to be highly influential. According to Christine Kinealy, it "helped ... to give the tragedy its rightful place in Irish history", and as Michael de Nie recently pointed out, it "established what became the consensus view of the great surge of famine scholarship in the following years."⁸⁹ Reviews of the volume particularly commended Donnelly's account for its comprehensiveness, its narrative unity and analytic sharpness. Some deemed it the best general history of the Famine available at the time, and one critic held that it deserved "to be published as a separate book and made available to a wider audience."⁹⁰ That book, entitled *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, eventually appeared in 2001. The original eight chapters, now expanded with the author's later research on key issues, make up the core of the book. Two new chapters complete the whole: the introduction gives an overview of Famine historiography to date, and the final chapter examines the nationalist construction of Famine memory.

Like other Famine historians from Mitchel to the present, Donnelly addresses the question of food exports. The consensus among the majority of Famine historians, revisionist as well as post-revisionist, seems to be that famine could not have been averted by prohibiting exports, but that a temporary embargo on the grain crop of 1846 could have reduced the "starvation gap" between the failure of the potato in August and the arrival of imported supplies in the spring of 1847. Referring to an estimate by the agricultural meteorologist Austin Bourke, Donnelly notes that the successive potato blights in the eighteen-forties "destroyed the crop which had provided ... approximately 60 per cent of the nation's food needs on the eve of the famine." The resulting food gap, he concludes, "was so enormous that it could not have been filled even if all the grain exported in those years had been retained in the country."⁹¹ Furthermore, Donnelly argues,

⁸⁹ Kinealy, Review of James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, in *Victorian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2002), pp. 527-28 [527]; de Nie, "Reflections", in Michael de Nie and Sean Farrell (eds), *Power and Popular Culture in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), pp. 214-29 [220].

⁹⁰ Gary Owens, Review of W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland*, vol. V, in *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 65, no. 1 (1993), p. 212. See also Mary Daly's review in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 27, no. 106 (1990), pp. 173-74, and Elizabeth Malcolm, Review of James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2004), pp. 377-79 [378].

⁹¹ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2001), p. 215. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

[t]he din of contemporary protest over the continuing flow of food out of the famine-stricken country has often been allowed to conceal the large-scale diversion of Irish grain from export to home consumption. (61)

Statistics provided to support this argument show that there was indeed a substantial decrease in exports of corn, meal and flour from Ireland to England between 1845 and 1847. In my view, this nevertheless raises some questions. Who benefited from this diversion of grain to home consumption? And perhaps more importantly, did it improve the situation of the cottiers and labourers who were the hardest hit by the loss of the potato? “Insofar as grain retained in Ireland was marketed there to feed the starving”, Donnelly writes,

farmers’ incomes benefited. Indeed, before 1848 the strength of domestic demand was such that fat profits (in 1846, obscene profits) accrued to that minority of farmers with large surpluses of grain to dispose of. But for the majority of tillage farmers, greatly increased subsistence needs cut deeply into the grain supplies that they could offer for sale.

In other words, while strong farmers profited, the living standards of the smaller landholders fell since they were “obliged to consume ... the corn which in former years procured clothes and other comforts for them” (62). If these smallholders suffered hardship, the situation was surely much worse for the cottiers and labourers who had no surplus of any kind and who could not afford the exorbitant price of grain sold in the home market. So, although Donnelly does not comment on the implications of diverted exports for the starving poor, it is very likely that the diversion did little to improve their lot.

In her book *The Great Irish Famine* published in 2002, Christine Kinealy argues that the reduction in grain exports “was largely in response to a poor harvest rather than an indication of the commodity being diverted to home consumption.” Moreover, she asserts,

most of the debate about food availability has centered on corn, ignoring the fact that large amounts of other foodstuffs were being produced in and exported from Ireland, whilst little food apart from grain was being imported.⁹²

Kinealy’s claim that “sufficient food was being produced in the country to feed the people” is based on export figures relating to cattle, livestock, grain, butter and other types of produce which seem to reveal that the government’s data underestimated the scale of total food exports from Ireland between 1846 and

⁹² Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, pp. 105, 110.

1848. This apparent endorsement of Mitchel's notion of starvation amidst plenty leads her to conclude that

[t]he Irish poor did not starve because there was an inadequate supply of food within the country, they starved because political, commercial and individual greed was given priority over the saving of lives in one part of the United Kingdom.⁹³

Donnelly sees the matter of food supply in a different light. In calorific terms, he argues, the retention of grain and other commodities such as meat and dairy products could not have compensated for the loss of the potato in the long run:

Imports of grain and Indian corn actually made a far greater contribution than the complete retention of these exports could have achieved, since the imports ... added 5,5 thousand million calories per day to food stocks, whereas the exports depleted them only at the rate of 1,9 million calories per day. (215)⁹⁴

According to Peter Gray, "Kinealy's case is simply not proven" because, among other things, she assumes the statistics she cites to be definitive while she does not quantify "the degree to which government export statistics were inaccurate" nor analyse "the respective calorific values of available foodstuffs."⁹⁵ Although it can be argued that Kinealy's statistics are questionable and that her analytical approach in this matter is flawed, it seems to me that she makes a valid point. Even if historians have not exactly ignored the fact that large quantities of food other than grain were exported, they have perhaps underestimated the extent to which hunger could have been alleviated by retaining this food in the country. As these conflicting interpretations indicate, there is no absolute agreement on the export question even among post-revisionist historians, and it appears that the issue will continue to be a matter of contention among historians of the Great Famine.

While Donnelly rejects the notion that retaining all the exported produce in Ireland would have prevented famine, he nevertheless finds that a temporary embargo on grain exports in 1846 would have "helped materially to fill the huge gap in domestic food supply that persisted until long after the maize ordered from America began to reach Irish shores." As he sees it, the government's refusal to allow such an embargo was a major blunder:

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 25, 116.

⁹⁴ Donnelly's figures are based on the calculations of Peter Solar, see "The Great Famine was no ordinary subsistence crisis", in Margaret Crawford (ed.), *Famine: The Irish Experience 900-1900* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1989), pp. 112-31 [123-26].

⁹⁵ Gray, Review of Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*, p. 50.

Trevelyan's decision, never questioned by his superiors, seems to have been based more on his rigid adherence to *laissez-faire* economic doctrines than on a careful assessment of its practical short-term consequences. To have forbidden exports from the 1846 grain harvest might well have led to some reduction in food imports late in 1846 or early in 1847, but it would hardly have paralysed the trade[.] ... [T]his refusal to prohibit exports, even for a limited period, was one of Trevelyan's worst mistakes, although the blame was of course not his alone. (69)

The fact that the exportation of grain continued unrestricted, Donnelly notes, "contributed significantly to the remorseless rise of Irish food prices between September and the end of the year." This meant that the poor, even if employed on the public works, found it increasingly difficult to procure food for their families. Their situation was further exacerbated by the government's insistence that food from the depots was to be sold at the current market price. The justification for this, Donnelly writes, was that

private traders had to be allowed to earn reasonable profits, and that if they were undersold, there would be such a rush to the depots that the limited supplies would quickly be exhausted. The latter argument contained some truth, but the former displayed, to say the least, undue tenderness for grain importers and dealers, whose profits swelled. (69)

Trevelyan's "inflexible view" regarding the necessity of enforcing market prices in order to secure foreign imports, Donnelly concludes, was "to make a religion of the market" (70).

In spite of describing Trevelyan as "incorrigibly blinkered" (21), Donnelly questions both Woodham-Smith's scapegoating of him and Kinealy's suggestion that "there was almost a conspiracy organised by Trevelyan and a handful of British civil servants" (28). In agreement with Peter Gray's assessment of the Treasury secretary's role, he observes that

the views of Trevelyan and other leading civil servants in London were widely shared, and his domination of policy was the outcome partly of divisions within the cabinet and partly of the congruence of many of his attitudes with those of both some key cabinet ministers and a wide section of the educated British public.(29)

Neither Trevelyan nor the government as a whole are subject to categorical condemnation in *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. As Margaret Preston notes in her review of the book, "Donnelly makes an impressive effort to allow the reader to make her own judgment as to the responsiveness of the government to the

crisis.”⁹⁶ This does not mean that he is uncritical of the implemented relief policies, but his criticism is balanced and largely matter-of-fact, and presented with no trace of the assertive tone which dominates Mitchel’s writing. In his account of the public works, he acknowledges the difficulties facing the government in the attempt to provide employment for hundreds of thousands of people.

At the same time, Donnelly points out the shortcomings of the scheme. The complicated bureaucracy involved in starting up the works caused delays as well as considerable problems for the Board of Works officials who were trying to keep up with the enormous demand for employment. Donnelly concurs with Kinealy in thinking that the most fundamental problem was the inadequacy of wages, especially after the system of task work was introduced. Subject to this *modus operandi*,

too many earned too little to enable them to ward off starvation and disease. A signal defect of the task work regime was the growing physical debility of many labourers suffering from malnutrition, a condition which made it impossible for them to earn the sums of which ‘ordinary’ workers were considered capable. (76)

Numerous quotations of statements by contemporaries confirm the consequences for the workers and their families. In December, an inspecting officer in County Leitrim reported that

the miserable condition of the half-famished people is greatly increased by the exorbitant ... price of meal and provisions, insomuch that the wages gained by them on the works are quite inadequate to purchase a sufficiency to feed many large families. (77)

Stewards in County Clare told of undernourished and exhausted labourers tottering on the works, hundreds of whom were “never seen to taste food from the time they come in the morning until they depart at nightfall” (76). Donnelly notes that, in most places, 8d. and even 10d. per day was “literally a starvation wage” for a labourer with a large family, and many workers earned even less. To make matters worse, there were frequent and often protracted delays in the payment of wages. Thus, he concludes, it was no wonder that “in the winter of 1846/47 labourers on the works collapsed from exhaustion” (77).

Donnelly’s analysis of the government’s soup kitchen scheme essentially supports the critical approach of Woodham-Smith and Kinealy. Outlining the

⁹⁶ Margaret Preston, “Indifference, not genocide,” *Irish Literary Supplement*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2002), pp. 24-25 [24].

new administrative machinery involved in putting the system into practice, he points out that

[b]ecause the relief commission was firmly determined to impose administrative order and strict financial accountability on [the] extended bureaucracy, the machinery was not activated as quickly as the doleful circumstances demanded. The mere preparation, printing and distribution of the forms and documents considered necessary ... constituted a vast undertaking in itself, consuming invaluable time. (82)

The parish priest of Goresbridge, County Kilkenny, explained how the bureaucracy worked and what this meant for the poor who were in urgent need of assistance:

The names of the poor applicants for relief are taken down; the lists are then sent to Kilkenny, from thence to Dublin and then home again; in all which places they are to undergo revision, and if any error be discovered full time must be taken to correct it before the poor starving creatures will get one pint of porridge.⁹⁷

One can imagine how very long this procedure would have taken when initiated from, say, the remotest districts of County Mayo. In many of the most destitute regions of the country, the resulting hiatus between the shutdown of the public works and the commencement of food distribution under the new relief act greatly aggravated the distress of the hungry masses. Donnelly shows that the dismissal of labourers did not proceed as rapidly as the government had first intended. Even so, he maintains, "it was still too fast to be fully accommodated by the slow extension of the new scheme" (83).

In April 1847, almost a month after the distribution of rations was set to begin, the *Cork Examiner* blamed the government for the increasing distress in Youghal:

The poor labourers have been in great numbers discharged from the Works here, and no provision made for themselves or their wretched families. They are thus literally left to starve[.] ... The new law has not been put into force, and every day is a day of starvation and of death[.] ... Time will show that, whatever be their intentions, the conduct of the Government officials will produce ruin and destruction in the country.⁹⁸

Similar complaints were widely lodged by relief committees as well as by priests and members of the public in their correspondence with the Relief Commission. But the government were not prepared to take responsibility. Referring to

⁹⁷ Quoted in Ó Cathaoir, *Famine Diary*, p. 115.

⁹⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 2 April 1847.

a report of the relief commissioners in March, Donnelly notes that they faulted the local committees for the delays, claiming that

[s]ome of them merely wanted to exhaust their own financial resources before adhering to the new scheme, but many others wished to see the public works system of relief extended as long as possible. (82)

He also offers a conceivable explanation for why some committees wanted to retain the old system: in spite of their defects, the public works were “a known quantity”, and since they demanded labour in exchange for relief, they “were not ‘demoralising’ like gratuitous aid.” Moreover, they were “less vexatious to the local committees than soup kitchens” (82). Donnelly’s interpretation of this particular issue, then, suggests that neither the government nor the local committees can alone be held responsible for the delays.

Like the public works, the system of soup kitchens was open to abuse. In several districts, Donnelly points out, the result of “intimidation, deceit, illegitimate influence” or the munificence of committee members was that, contrary to government regulations, persons who were not absolutely destitute were placed on the relief lists (86). A number of government inspectors described cases of abuse in their reports to the Relief Commission. One officer found that the committee under his supervision were “all jobbing and intriguing” and that

[t]here is immense difficulty in ascertaining the real circumstances of applicants where they are so shamelessly devoid of truth. A day or two since I found the wife of the coachman of a magistrate of 2000*l.* a-year on the relief list.

An officer in another district claimed that the local committee had “returned the number of destitute 2000 over the actual population of the division”, and this was apparently not a solitary case.⁹⁹ As the relief commissioners saw it, this misconduct on the part of local functionaries led to

a most unjustifiable expenditure of the relief funds, amounting to fraud ... [and] to an absolute abstraction of the food provided as the sole resource of families that are entirely destitute.

Therefore, they concluded, the various abuses brought to their attention could “be considered as nothing less than crime of the greatest magnitude.”¹⁰⁰

Government officials were not alone in complaining of maladministration. In April, the signatories of a letter to the Lord Lieutenant claimed that the peo-

⁹⁹ Commission on Relief, *Distress (Ireland): Third Report of the Relief Commissioners* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1847), p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

ple “appointed for the purpose of giving relief to the poor” were leaving them “in a starving condition, feeding their own friends and servants with the relief money.”¹⁰¹ The allegation that jobbery and fraud were depriving the destitute of their legitimate right to relief was also made in the media. In May, the *Fermanagh Reporter* maintained that

there are many instances wherein persons in very little need get tickets and are obtaining soup while those who have no earthly means are denied any. This generally arises from the fact that the former induce people to interpose on their behalf with the members of the relief committee, and to represent them as in a state of destitution, while the others being too miserable for any person to be interested about them, are left to their own resources and, of course, are not attended to, or believed, when they personally apply for food.¹⁰²

Jonathan Pim of the Society of Friends was told by a “gentleman” that, had he not been an eyewitness, he

could scarcely have conceived it possible, that the awful visitation with which this country is afflicted, should have produced such an utter disregard of integrity in the administration of its relief.¹⁰³

In addition to the above charges, the local committees were sometimes accused of buying meal of bad quality, of pandering to rate payers by striking people allegedly entitled to assistance off the relief lists, and of issuing rations smaller than those stipulated by the regulations. In June, the writer of an anonymous letter to the Lord Lieutenant claimed that the meal issued to the poor by the Tubbercurry committee was “of the very worst description, by means of influential persons having friends selling such in Sligo.”¹⁰⁴ That same month, one Patrick Dorrian made a complaint against the committee at Bundoran, County Donegal, stating that “from an unfeeling dread of taxation”, the rate payers had “succeeded with the committee in depriving [him] and others equally destitute of their rations as ordered by the legislation.” The inspecting officer dismissed the complaint on the grounds that Dorrian was removed from the relief list because a part of his family had been “detected in stealing flour out of Mr McMullan’s bakery at Bundoran.”¹⁰⁵ In July, the same committee was implicated by the curate of Finner parish who as-

¹⁰¹ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 166.

¹⁰² Quoted in Brian MacDonald, *A Time of Desolation* (Enniskillen: Clogher Historical Society, 2001), p. 83.

¹⁰³ Pim, *The Condition and Prospects of Ireland*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁰⁴ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁵ Brian MacDonald (ed.), “The Famine Archive: Distress Papers”, *Clogher Record*, vol. xvii, no. 2 (2001), pp. 402-654 [609].

sented that they “in no cases allow a family full rations, even though entirely destitute.” His allegation was backed up by three other persons, one of them actually a member of the committee in question. In reply, the rest of the committee gave “the most unqualified contradiction” to this “misrepresentation” which “tended to place odium on the committee generally.”¹⁰⁶

Even if the local bodies entrusted with the distribution of relief were often accused of misconduct, they were not always singled out as culprits when the soup kitchen scheme was perceived as dysfunctional. One person who took it upon himself to defend them was Richard Webb of the Society of Friends. Reporting to the Society from Belmullet in May, he expressed his opinion that “much credit” was due to the distributors. “[I]t is difficult”, he wrote,

for any but an eye-witness to form a correct idea of the position of the handful of persons in this miserable country, who are properly qualified for the distribution of grants. Placed in the midst of a starving and mendicant population ... they are liable to continual charges of unfairness, partiality, indifference, or want of judgement; charges that are made without stint, and are much more easily made than refuted. Even if the supplies were not distributed in perfect fairness, or in the best possible way, I believe nearly all who act as volunteers on behalf of the suffering poor do the best they can.¹⁰⁷

Owing to the paucity of extant records, it is difficult to determine to what extent the complaints against certain relief committees were warranted. As the historian Ciáran Ó Murchadha has observed, “[n]ewspaper coverage of committee meetings for this period is erratic and sparse, and the relief commission papers are of no great help either.”¹⁰⁸ Even so, it seems reasonable to assume that, as a result of external influence, intimidation, greed, or desperate circumstances, committees as well as applicants for relief succumbed to varying degrees of abuse and fraudulent practices. Donnelly’s analysis of this issue certainly supports this assumption and, as such, casts doubt on Mitchel’s interpretation which holds the government alone responsible for the defects in the soup kitchen scheme.

Yet Donnelly does not exonerate the government in all respects. As he sees it,

if the system was open to abuse, it was increasingly operated in such a way as to exclude or discourage many more people who would have benefited from a less stringent and demeaning regime. The controversy over whether food should be distributed in an uncooked or a cooked form highlights this problem. (86)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 617-24.

¹⁰⁷ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁸ Ciáran Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Land* (Ennis: Clasp Press, 1998), pp. 116-17.

At least initially, many persons entitled to gratuitous relief refused to take the soup, which they found unpalatable, demanding instead rations of meal to prepare themselves. The relief commissioners nevertheless insisted that the rations were to be distributed in a cooked form because raw meal could easily be sold, and “even the poor requiring the food themselves ... will dispose of it for money, tea or tobacco.” Another compelling reason for adhering to the rule of issuing cooked food only, the commissioners stated, was

the serious evil [of] the consumption of meal or rice, *but more particularly Indian meal*, in a raw or badly cooked state, which will predispose to and aggravate dysentery and diarrhoea, already so prevalent through the country. [original emphasis]¹⁰⁹

While Donnelly finds these arguments justified, he also allows the reader to consider the matter of relief food from the point of view of the recipients. To begin with, there was widespread resistance to the entire soup kitchen scheme, particularly by those who had previously earned their living – although often a meagre one – on the public works. These people felt that the new system reduced them to paupers, and they were ashamed at having to exist on handouts. In Donnelly’s view, the main reason for this resistance was “plain enough”, but it was not understood by the authorities:

The demeaning business of requiring the whole family to troop every day to the soup kitchen, each member carrying a bowl, pot, or can, and waiting in a long queue until one’s number was called, painfully violated the popular sense of dignity. (87)

Resistance eventually died out as people came to realize that they had only two options: the soup kitchen or death from starvation. But what were their chances of surviving on the rations provided under the Temporary Relief Act? According to Donnelly, the daily allowance “could hardly be described as generous”, and at least initially “much of the soup was very thin” (87, 89). Contemporary sources as well as folklore strongly suggest that the portions doled out to the people were both frugal and of poor quality. The *Fermanagh Reporter* claimed that “the generality of those who are getting it [the soup] are merely enabled to sustain life”, and went on to ask: “What is one little pint of but tolerable soup to any full-grown person when obliged to subsist on it for 24 hours?”¹¹⁰ The oral tradition of the period indicates that there was often good reason for the poor to be dissatisfied with the relief food. Summing up

¹⁰⁹ Commission on Relief, *Distress (Ireland): Second Report of the Relief Commissioners*, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in MacDonald, *A Time of Desolation*, p. 83.

his findings in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, Roger McHugh writes:

A sack of Indian meal might be all that went into the boiler, producing a thin watery 'prawpeen' or 'poorhouse porridge' which [was] described in a variety of graphic ways[.] ... Sometimes soup would be made from old or diseased animals, or 'porridge' would consist of a handful of meal thrown into cold water. ¹¹¹

The inadequacy of the rations was sometimes ascribed to the parsimony of the government. In April, exasperated by their apparent obsession with expenditure, the editor of the *Clare Journal* wrote:

Our table is covered with receipts for making cheap soup, affording little more nourishment than a drink of cold water[.] ... Can it be that our countrymen are indeed to be reduced to living skeletons, rather than that our statesmen should swerve from their stern principles of so-called political economy? Surely it is disgraceful to a powerful empire like Great Britain to have recourse to such a mean, niggardly system of relief. ¹¹²

On the other hand, McHugh finds that the folklore tended to blame local distributors rather than the government, and Donnelly, too, points out that rations in many cases were diminished by a "local parsimony even greater than that of the central authorities" (89). There is good reason to believe, then, that in cases such as that of the Bundoran relief committee referred to above, the complaints were legitimate in spite of the committee's protestations to the contrary.

Donnelly's final verdict on the soup kitchen scheme coincides with the conclusion arrived at by revisionist historians. "For all its shortcomings", he writes,

[it] must be judged more than a qualified success[.] ... Though many additional thousands should have been fed, and though all should have been fed more generously, the scheme was by far the most effective of all the methods adopted by the government[.] ... Indeed, the most profound regrets that might be voiced are that the system was not introduced much earlier, and that it was not continued after September 1847. While it lasted, and for those whom it reached, starvation was generally averted and disease considerably lessened[.] ... Even the awful scourge of typhus ... which was undoubtedly spread by the gathering of crowds around the kitchens, was reportedly less often fatal among food recipients. (90-91)

But if Donnelly considers the soup kitchens a basically successful form of relief, he finds the subsequent policy of poor law relief "totally misguided" because

¹¹¹ Roger McHugh, "The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition", in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 409. See also Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, pp. 132-49.

¹¹² Quoted in Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Land*, p. 106.

the financial structure of the system was demonstrably unable to support the growing number of destitute people in need of assistance:

The dictum that Irish property should carry the full weight of relieving Irish poverty may have been a reasonable proposition for ordinary times and circumstances, but in the face of a catastrophic famine it was a prescription for both horribly inadequate resources and the ruination of much Irish property. (116)

To illustrate this point, Donnelly refers to the increasing difficulties encountered by the Poor Law guardians in collecting taxes after the new legislation came into operation in the autumn of 1847. By this time, many unions in the most impoverished parts of the country were already in serious financial trouble since a considerable number of the ratepaying tenantry had been pauperized and the landed proprietors had lost a large portion of their rental income. Particularly in the west and the south, the poor rates amounted to over 25 per cent of the valuation of the land, and even with rates this high, the guardians were often unable to meet their financial obligations. Because the new legislation extended the right to relief to the able-bodied (although with specific provisos), it was feared that the burden of taxation would become even heavier, and this led to widespread resistance to the measure. Landlords in particular were highly critical of the system, and Donnelly finds their hostility “thoroughly understandable.” First of all, he points out, they were bound by law to pay the rates for all holdings valued at £4 or less. Secondly,

each poor law union was supposed to be self-financing, and proprietors whose estates were located in the impoverished unions ... felt deeply aggrieved that the burden of providing for an extraordinary calamity like the famine should fall so disproportionately on their shoulders. (117)

For landlords who were already insolvent, or nearly so, the prospect of an amended Poor Law undoubtedly presented an ominous scenario. In the Lisadell division of the Sligo union, for example, 63 per cent of all holdings were rated at £4 or less.¹¹³ In the Westport union, the corresponding figure was 85 per cent (137). The obligation to pay the rates for these holdings, combined with the loss of rentals, proved too much for many landlords. As Donnelly observes, “a substantial number wound up in the special bankruptcy court established for insolvent Irish proprietors in 1849” (132).

Already in November 1846, John Stuart Mill argued that “a poor law is not a thing for a temporary exigency”, and in his opinion,

¹¹³ Gerard Moran, *Sir Robert Gore Booth and his landed estate in County Sligo*, p. 23.

no reasonable person can suppose that the resources of the Irish landlords are sufficient, tax them ever so heavily, to effect all that is necessary for shielding the Irish population from hunger until next year's crops come in.¹¹⁴

In the autumn of 1847, this argument should have carried even greater weight, given the bleak outlook for the following year due to the poor potato harvest. But in Britain, the prevalent view of Irish landlords as irresponsible, selfish profligates and whining beggars at the Treasury door ensured that their objections to poor law relief went unheeded, and their claim that they would eventually be ruined by it met with disbelief. The *Times* thought it unlikely that the landlords would be “swamped” by the rates, and the *Illustrated London News* declared that “some remaining thousands [of pounds] will still flow in even after the rates are paid” (97). Yet a concession was made to the landed interest in the form of the Gregory clause, “a weapon that would enable [landlords] to clear their estates of pauperised smallholders who were paying little or no rent.” According to Donnelly, the “enormous potential” of the clause as a device for getting rid of these smallholders “was widely recognised in parliament” (102). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Mitchel saw the Poor Law Amendment Act as yet another “contrivance for slaughter”, this one the result of the perceived collusion between landlords and government. Donnelly grants that the government’s responses to Irish distress from the autumn of 1847 on were “murderous in their consequences” even though they were not so in their intentions (92). He concludes that

the connecting line that ran from the blight to mass eviction, mass death, and mass emigration embraced the poor law system imposed by Britain. This is not to say that the amended poor law did not save many lives; it is to say that it caused many deaths, incalculable suffering, and a substantial part of the huge exodus (23).

The rationale that paved the way for this “connecting line” could perhaps be labelled political economy, and Donnelly seems to imply as much when he writes:

Of course, British financial self-interest would be well served by the new law, and with varying degrees of frankness this critical point was made frequently: Irish poverty, massive in its dimensions, could not permanently be allowed to siphon off English wealth. (99-100)

Already before the Famine, the estates of many Irish landlords were heavily encumbered. Donnelly ascribes this to “depressed markets and lagging rents”

¹¹⁴ J. S. Mill, *Newspaper Writings*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 24, ed. Ann P. and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 930.

as well as to the accumulation of debts incurred to support an extravagant lifestyle. The precarious situation of these landowners was exacerbated by the Famine which

added substantially to the number of bankrupt and acutely embarrassed proprietors. Lost rents, heavy poor rates, and (in some cases) significant expenditures for employment erased what was for many a narrow margin of safety between income and outgoings even before 1845. (162)

The financial difficulties arising from these liabilities, in combination with varying degrees of indebtedness, put many a landlord “under the necessity of ejecting or being ejected”, as the Marquess of Sligo put it. “[T]his perceived choice”, Donnelly writes, “provided a general rationalisation among landlords for the great clearances of defaulting or insolvent tenants” (137-38). While sensitive to the economic problems facing landlords, Donnelly finds no excuses for the often cruel manner of their evictions:

In many thousands of cases estate-clearing landlords and agents used physical force or heavy-handed pressure to bring about the destruction of cabins which they sought. Many pauper families had their houses burned, often quite illegally. (114)

His account of the mass clearances in County Mayo and in the Kilrush union of County Clare attests to the great misery inflicted on the dispossessed tenants. Some families left on the roadside after their cabins were unroofed, levelled or burned by the “crowbar brigade” sought refuge in overcrowded, disease-infested workhouses which often refused to admit them, and some sheltered in neighbouring cabins until they were forced out after the occupying tenants were threatened with penalties for harbouring vagrants or paupers. Others erected makeshift dwellings “in the bogs, or on pieces of waste ground where they hoped to be left unmolested – a vain hope in numerous instances.” George Poulett Scrope described these “scalps”, or “scalpeens”, as places “totally unfit for human habitations”, and Donnelly notes that they obviously provided scant protection for the evicted families. Consequently,

inclement weather, often combined with disease and the denial of outdoor relief, would eventually drive the dispossessed (if they had not died first) to the workhouse as a last resort, in spite of their detestation of the place. But squatters in such temporary dwellings might also simply become the targets of a new round of burnings, tumbings, or levellings engineered by remorseless landlords or agents. (155)



Scalpeen of an evicted family. *Illustrated London News*, 16 December 1848.

Yet in an effort to defend themselves, some landlords and agents attempted to downplay the disastrous consequences of their clearances. According to Captain Kennedy, the Poor Law inspector in Kilrush union, between 16,000 and 19,000 persons were evicted in the union during the period from late 1847 to July 1850. Colonel Crofton Vandeleur, one of the largest of the Kilrush landowners, contested Kennedy's figures, claiming that they "should be reduced by as much as half." Marcus Keane, who acted as agent for several other proprietors in the same union, insisted that he had "pulled down very few houses." But as Donnelly shows, "[n]either Keane nor Vandeleur was telling the truth." Their allegations were "thoroughly shredded" by Francis Coffee, a professional surveyor, who produced "a detailed Ordnance map" that showed "the precise location of the 2,700 instances of eviction identified in the Kilrush union." Coffee found that "the houses of 1,951 families had been levelled and that a further 408 families had been displaced (or 'unhoused') from their dwellings." Vandeleur had evicted "as many as 180 families" consisting of just over one thousand persons, and on estates where Keane acted as agent, "some 500 hous-

es had been levelled”(146-47). Coffee’s findings suggest that both Keane and Vandeleur were consciously lying in the effort to vindicate themselves. Another strategy these two employed for their self-defence was to play the economic improvement card. “It would have been utterly impossible”, Vandeleur argued,

that the country could have progressed, or that improvements could have been carried out, or that either rates or rent could have been paid in the union if ejectments had not taken place.

Similarly, Keane asserted that “the evictions, and driving paupers off the land, were absolutely necessary to the welfare of the country.” As Donnelly sees it,

[t]his was exactly the kind of justification, self-evident to its exponents, that allowed most of the depopulators of Ireland to conceal from themselves the enormity of their crimes. (156)

What Donnelly presents for the consideration of his readers, then, is a scenario in which the Irish masses are caught between the self-interest of the British government on the one side and that of the Irish landlords on the other. In Britain, economic necessity presumably dictated that Irish property should support Irish poverty; in Ireland, landlords perceived the clearance of paupers off their estates as an economic necessity. It may not have been intentional, as Mitchel claimed it was, but between the two, the Irish poor were left to starve or to face the prospect of either the workhouse or the emigrant ship. In September 1848, an Irish Justice of the Peace wrote to Under Secretary T. N. Redington, expressing his “anxious hope” that

at the next meeting of parliament the Irish Poor Law will be revised so as to render the law a benefit and a blessing to the country instead of being, as it now is, the ruin of Ireland.¹¹⁵

It was a futile hope – the government held fast to their determination that Irish property must support Irish poverty, and the worst of the mass clearances were still to come.

As noted earlier, Irish public opinion blamed the landlords or the British government or both for exacerbating the suffering of the poor. Landlords were frequently described as heartless exterminators indifferent to the plight of their evicted tenants. At the same time, the government was condemned for doing nothing to prevent mass clearances. In the spring of 1848, the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* complained that

¹¹⁵ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, p. 348.

nothing, absolutely nothing, is done to save the lives of the people – they are swept out of their holdings, swept out of life, without an effort on the part of our rulers to stay the violent progress of human destruction. (23)

A year later, an article in the conservative *Dublin University Magazine* denounced the entire poor law system as cruelly unjust “in its partial exactions from classes unprepared and unprovided for the new burdens cast upon them.” Yet, the article continued,

at the cost of impoverished owners and occupiers of land we had seen paupers fed. We have seen since the cost incurred, and the wronged paupers starved. This was to see the poor law exposed in an aspect of malignity, as well as injustice.¹¹⁶

In Britain, the attitude to the amended Poor Law and the ensuing clearances of smallholders and cottiers was more ambivalent. Responding to the particularly cruel evictions on the Blake estate in Co. Galway in late 1847 and early 1848, the *Times* declared that the government “should inflict upon violence and injustice a penalty at once speedy, stringent and commensurate with the wrong done.”¹¹⁷ The *Illustrated London News* called for an “immediate revision” of the Poor Law in order to “prevent a large and aggravated augmentation of the social evils” afflicting Ireland (122). A bill introduced by Russell in May intended to curb the increasing scale of evictions proved to be largely ineffective (115-16). In November, the *Illustrated London News* lamented that the Poor Law, although “so just in theory”, had apparently broken down, and the landlords were now seen more as victims than exterminators:

Small farmers and great landed proprietors are equally pinched or crushed beneath the operation of the law. Without the poor law the people would have died of famine; with a poor law the people are not elevated above habitual and constant pauperism, and the property of the landlords is all but confiscated. (122)

Yet as Donnelly notes, neither the *Times* nor the *Illustrated London News* was prepared to discard the Poor Law, and the tendency to re-evaluate the position of the landlords was gradually followed by a less critical attitude to evictions.

By 1849, the *Times* was commending the poor law system which, as the paper saw it, was paving the way for “a future prosperity.” The fact that this entailed the ruination of peoples’ lives mattered less than the apparently posi-

¹¹⁶ [Isaac Butt], “Poor-Law versus the Poor – Our Rate in Aid”, *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. xxxiii, no. cxvii (May 1849), pp. 656-66 [656].

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 192.

tive result of depopulation. “The rigorous administration of the poor law”, the editorial in the issue of 2 April stated,

is destroying small holdings, reducing needy proprietors to utter insolvency, compelling them to surrender their estates into better hands, instigating an emigration far beyond any which a government could undertake, and so leaving the soil of Ireland open to industrial enterprise and the introduction of new capital. (131)

In October, the *Illustrated London News* retracted its earlier condemnation of clearances. “The truth is”, the paper declared,

that these evictions ... are not merely a legal but a natural process; and however much we may deplore the misery from which they spring, and which they so dreadfully aggravate, we cannot compel the Irish proprietors to continue in their miserable holdings the wretched swarms of people who pay no rent, and who prevent the improvement of property as long as they remain upon it. (124-25)

The implication here is that, through this “natural process”, Ireland will be rid of what many Britons saw as one of the chief impediments to her regeneration, namely the “surplus” population. A couple of months later, the same paper published the first of a series of articles by its Irish correspondent entitled “Condition of Ireland: Illustrations of the new poor law.” As noted earlier, the author of these articles argued that, in the final analysis, the Poor Law was the instrument of the destruction of the Irish people. Although he did not exonerate the landlords, he insisted that “the law incited them to do wrong, and took away the means by which they might have repaired some of the damage.”¹¹⁸ In other words, the government was to blame for implementing a policy that proved to be the ruin rather than the salvation of the people, as it was ostensibly meant to be. “As I see before me the sickening evidence of its operation”, he wrote from County Clare,

it is plain, whatever measures may be required to regenerate Ireland, that the Poor-law is only the climax of the ignorant legislation that ... has perverted the Irish, and made their naturally fertile abode one scene of desolation.¹¹⁹

This was not exactly commensurate with the editorial line of the *Illustrated London News*, which never seriously entertained the notion of government culpability. The fact that the periodical nevertheless published these articles highlights the vacillation that characterized British press coverage of the Poor Law issue. And as Donnelly points out,

¹¹⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 26 January 1850.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 January 1850.

the existence in Britain of widespread public ambivalence about the real and perceived practical consequences of strictly administering the poor law ... surely contributed heavily to a paralysis of the moral and political will to take effective countermeasures. (122)

This ambivalence was gradually replaced by the decided opinion that Britain should not be obliged to make additional financial sacrifices for Ireland. "Even after the dire consequences of the amended poor law became plain", Donnelly writes, "there was no widespread disposition to reassume any substantial share of the costs of relieving mass destitution." In March 1849, the *Illustrated London News* declared that "Great Britain cannot continue to throw her hard-won millions into the bottomless pit of Celtic pauperism." As Donnelly sees it, this can "safely be taken as the authentic or at least the dominant voice of the British middle classes" (127). The public objection to extended financial aid was reflected in the government's reluctance to advance funds, even on the credit of the rates, in the spring of 1849, as well as in the enforcement of the rate-in-aid which was levied on Ireland alone, thus relieving the government of financial assistance to bankrupt unions. Aside from the economic argument against further intervention, there was also the moral one. The dominant perception of Ireland as "a nation of beggars", where idleness, improvidence and dependence on others had reduced the people to destitution, nurtured the growing conviction that this "moral plague" could not be cured by granting "large additional amounts of British money" (130). Moralists in Parliament and at the Treasury as well as public opinion held that the Irish were ultimately responsible for their own miserable situation which, they claimed, could be improved only through persistent exertion and resolute self-reliance. This convergence of views no doubt strengthened the moralists' argument for minimum intervention, both before and after the transfer to poor law relief. Donnelly's analysis confirms that British public opinion, overlooked in the Edwards and Williams volume, had a significant impact on the government's policy choices

Although the amended Poor Law was intended to be the salvation of the Irish, its effect was virtually the opposite. According to Peter Gray, the policy failed because it was expected to accomplish "two largely incompatible tasks", namely "the relief of immediate distress, and the promotion of social and economic development."¹²⁰ Donnelly, too, identifies this misguided expectation and shows how poor law relief, contrary to its ostensibly benevolent purpose, added to the suffering of the starving and disease-ridden Irish masses. The appalling state of the workhouses demonstrated that the poor law system could not cope

¹²⁰ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, p. 291.

with the enormous demand for relief. To illustrate this point, Donnelly refers to some extreme cases in County Cork. By March 1847, the Fermoy workhouse held 1,800 paupers although it could provide “proper accommodation” for only 800, and “the sick and the healthy were all mixed up together” (103). In Skibbereen, the situation was even worse. In December 1848 the workhouse, built to hold 800 persons, was crammed with nearly 2,800 paupers “even though the local guardians had provided only three small timber sheds as additional room.” The sanitary conditions in houses like these, Donnelly remarks, were “anything but reassuring to potential applicants for admission, to say nothing of actual inmates.” As a last resort, many who were already so ill that they had resigned themselves to death nevertheless sought admission “merely to assure themselves of a coffin and burial at public expense” (104). But as Donnelly points out, the death toll was so high that the authorities “resorted to coffins with hinged bottoms so that they could be reused after the bodies had been dumped in mass graves or pits” (175). The “sliding coffin” and the mass graves figure prominently in the folklore of the period, and these burial practices contributed significantly to people’s deep-rooted aversion to the workhouse.¹²¹

In spite of the “horrors” of these institutions, Donnelly writes, “crowds of the destitute ... often clamoured for admission” (95). As contemporary accounts reveal, disease was not the only adversity the inmates had to contend with.¹²² Owing to the difficulty in collecting rates, many unions were unable to meet even the minimal standards prescribed by the Poor Law Commission. Food rations were often inadequate, especially in the distressed unions in the south and west where deaths from starvation sometimes occurred.¹²³ The lack of bedding and clothes meant that inmates were forced to lie on dirty straw on the floor, often with their rags as the only covering. Added to these privations was the anguish caused by segregation as, on admission, members of families were separated from each other. “Many families”, writes John O’Connor, “never saw each other alive again; sometimes ... they never knew if members were alive or dead.”¹²⁴ These factors, too, must surely be counted among the horrors of the workhouse, but they do not figure in *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. This is not to say that Donnelly makes light of the suffering of the people subjected to the regime of the amended Poor Law. He shows that destitute able-bodied persons

¹²¹ See for example Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 422-24, and Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes*, pp. 182-96.

¹²² See especially Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland* (1850).

¹²³ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 323.

¹²⁴ John O’Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland: The Fate of Ireland’s Poor* (Dublin: Anvil, 1995), p. 148.

entitled to outdoor relief did not fare much better than the so-called impotent poor confined in the workhouses. Adults on outdoor relief were allowed one pound of Indian meal a day, and children under the age of twelve received half a pound. Frugal as these rations were, the guardians in some unions “distributed less than the recommended quantity.” Consequently, there were “numerous reports of deaths among paupers in supposedly regular receipt of outdoor relief” (108). These deaths were hastened by the fact that the recipients of this scanty relief were required to labour at stone-breaking for eight to ten hours per day. Donnelly also notes that, aside from facilitating evictions, the Gregory clause was indirectly a “death-dealing instrument” because

destitute smallholders were starving themselves and their families to death by refusing to surrender all but a quarter-acre of their land, thus disqualifying them from assistance out of the poor rates.

He cites the case of one Michael Bradley, who “died from want” in 1848. This man

held two or three acres of land [near Louisburgh in Mayo] and therefore never applied to the relieving officer for assistance, but left his home for the purpose of begging and died on the side of the road, within two miles of the town of Westport.

This case, Donnelly observes, was “typical of thousands of others” (111).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Donnelly’s work is his evaluation of John Mitchel’s interpretation of the Great Famine. Rather than simply dismissing Mitchel as one who “wrote in an exaggerated way about the famine”,¹²⁵ Donnelly endeavours to explain what compelled Mitchel to insist that the famine was an artificial one, created by the English. His aim is not necessarily to vindicate Mitchel, but to enable readers to form an understanding of why and on what grounds he accused the British government of “the slaughter of a portion of [the Irish] people, and the pauperization of the rest.”¹²⁶ While Donnelly allows that “some of Mitchel’s accusations were far-fetched and wildly erroneous”, he suggests that “others contained a core of truth or an important aspect of the truth” (20). Mitchel’s charge of genocide against the government derived in part from the fact that food continued to be exported from Ireland throughout the famine years, and his notion of famine amidst plenty was shared by many of his contemporaries. The radical priest Fr John Kenyon, for example, wrote in 1847:

¹²⁵ Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. vii.

¹²⁶ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 157.

Year after year our plentiful harvests of golden grain, more than sufficient even since the potato blight to support, and to support well, our entire population, are seen to disappear off the face of the land. (212)

Donnelly argues that this idea of plenty “was based on a whole series of erroneous assumptions”, and Mitchel “greatly exaggerated the scale and significance of domestic Irish food production” (214, 217). And although Mitchel acknowledged that considerable amounts of grain were imported, he “belittled their significance in numerous ways” (218). Yet as Donnelly proposes, when “the murderous effects of allowing the grain crop of 1846 to be exported” (20) are taken into consideration, there is surely a core of truth in the claim that exports triggered mass starvation.

If Mitchel is on shaky ground regarding the export question, Donnelly finds that

the force of [his] case against the British government was (and remains) much stronger when he turned to consider the cost and character of those relief measures that he branded ‘contrivances for slaughter.’ ... Mitchel detected the genocidal intent of [the government] not only in its refusal to accept the essential degree of fiscal responsibility but also in the relief machinery itself and in the way in which it was calculated to work. (19)

In Mitchel’s view, the government’s financial contribution to famine relief was totally inadequate, and this was because “they chose to assume that the Exchequer was *their* Exchequer” [original emphasis].¹²⁷ Donnelly finds an aspect of truth in this criticism, too, inasmuch as the government refused to “make the cost of fighting the famine a United Kingdom charge” (20). As noted earlier, Mitchel also held that the government’s strict adherence to political economy and their insistence on bureaucratic procedures effectively frustrated the relief efforts. The result was an unprecedented disaster:

No sack of Magdeburg, or ravage of the Palatinate, ever approached in horror and desolation to the slaughter done in Ireland by mere official red tape and stationery, and the principles of political economy.¹²⁸

Noting Mitchel’s bitter remark that “Ireland died of political economy”, Donnelly comments: “If he had added the companion ideologies of providentialism and ‘moralism’ ... he would have been just about right” (35). In fact, Mitchel did recognize the link between providentialist thinking and the government’s attitude to Irish distress. “The English”, he wrote,

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 218.

call [the] famine a “dispensation of providence;” and ascribe it entirely to the blight of the potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then is first, a fraud – second, a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.¹²⁹

And even if Mitchel did not identify the moralist ideology as such, he certainly recognized the anti-Irish sentiment from which it derived. In his writings, he refers to the “vilification of the Celtic Irish” in British newspapers, books and journals which harped on the “barbarian Celtic nature”, enlarged upon “the filth of the dwellings and the persons of the Gael”, taunted them with ignorance, “mocked their poverty”, and called them “tatterdemalions” and “abject beggar[s] at England’s gate.”¹³⁰ Donnelly remarks that “Mitchel’s views about increasing British antagonism have been partly confirmed by recent research” (237). Quite so, but British press coverage of “the Irish question” between 1845 and 1850 already provided ample confirmation, though by no means all newspapers joined in the Paddy-whacking.

In the concluding chapter of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, Mitchel repeated his verdict on “the code of the poor laws”:

They were a failure for their professed purpose – that of relieving the famine; but were a complete success for their real purpose – that of uprooting the people from the land, and casting them forth to perish.¹³¹

Donnelly’s own analysis of the effects of the amended Poor Law gives substance to Mitchel’s claim that it was the most destructive of all the “relief” measures devised by the government: as Donnelly concludes, the consequences of the system were murderous. Mitchel, he writes, “correctly emphasized the connections between the workings of the [amended] poor law ... and the mass evictions, mass death and mass emigration that marked the famine” (22), and the defects of the system “were so serious that they gave plausibility to charges (then and later) that there was a genocidal intent at work” (102). The mass evictions in 1848 and 1849 gave further credence to the genocide charge “in the Irish popular consciousness” as well as among “active” nationalists (27), and Donnelly rightly points out that Mitchel was not alone in perceiving a “murderous collusion between Irish landlords and the British government” in these clearances (226).

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 219. Donnelly does cite this passage in a footnote (n. 124, p. 35)

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 93, 207-08; Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, pp. xxxvii, xxxix.

¹³¹ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*. p. 211.

As Mitchel saw it, the huge exodus of cottiers and small tenant farmers was further proof of this conspiracy. "If men clear estates", he wrote,

and chase the human surplus from pillar to post, in such sort that out-door relief becomes the national way of living, you may be sure that there will be a deep and pervading anxiety to get away; and then the exterminators may form themselves into a "committee" ... and say to the public, "Help us, you, to indulge the wish of our poor brethren; you perceive that they *want* to be off. God forbid *we* should ship them away, save with their cordial concurrence." ¹³²

Angrily refuting the notion that people were leaving Ireland voluntarily, Mitchell as well as "priests, editors of popular newspapers, and nationalist politicians of all factions" saw the emigration as a forced exile. This view, Donnelly explains,

was largely prompted by the bitter realisation that the British government had laid aside any conception of the famine as an imperial responsibility and had terminated all major schemes of direct relief funded by the treasury. (185-86)

He admits that, in the case of landlord-assisted emigration, "it was a pretence to say that a pauperised tenant without the ability to pay rent or to keep his family nourished had a 'free' choice in the matter" (144). But he also notes that recent research has shown that there was an "ardent desire" on the part of many destitute people "to escape from the immiserated conditions at home." Considering the emigration as a whole, then, Donnelly suggests that "[p]erhaps too much emphasis can be laid on the involuntary or forced nature" of the exodus (33). That is undoubtedly a reasonable proposition. Yet if we accept that the landlords and the government were responsible, even to some extent, for this immiseration, it seems to me that there is a core of truth in the perception of forced exile, too, particularly since, as Donnelly himself observes, it often "arose spontaneously at the popular level out of bitter common experience" (207). ¹³³

In the introductory chapter to *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, Donnelly states that Mitchel's genocide charge against the government "becomes more understandable when certain crucial facts and their interrelationships are kept in mind" (121). His subsequent analysis of the various relief policies and their consequences, and his evaluation of Mitchel's allegations of government cul-

¹³² Ibid., p. 140.

¹³³ In his book *Emigrants and Exiles*, Kerby Miller demonstrates that "many emigrants specifically blamed their 'exile' upon the English government or the English-enforced landlord system" (p. 5).

pability in the light of that analysis, supports this view of the matter in various ways. Even so, he implies that the understandable does not automatically signify the acceptable:

[I]f, as most scholars would hold, there must ... be a demonstration that English statesmen and their agents in Ireland were knowing and willing collaborators in a deliberate campaign of extermination, then the allegation of genocide is not only unproven but not even worth making.

Almost in the same breath, he offers a qualification to this remark: “[T]hat the charge has been levelled at all is one gauge of how radically mistaken were the actions and inactions of the politicians and administrators responsible for relief measures” (121). Nevertheless, Donnelly finds that “Mitchel’s full-blown genocide charge is unsustainable” (23), but this does not mean that he exonerates the government. “Had the political will existed to do more for the starving masses in Ireland”, he writes, “what happened there could have been far less tragic” (119). In his conclusion, Donnelly returns to the issue of food exports which he thinks “was and is” at the heart of the genocide charge. He notes that from the very beginning of the Famine, the Irish popular mind fixed on “a moral outrage – the immensely disturbing fact of large exports of food while the masses starved.” While he finds this outrage “understandable enough”, he concurs with revisionist historians who have shown that “the ghastly image ... badly distorts the real story of what happened to the food supply” (244–45). And yet, he argues, the nationalist interpretation of the Famine contains “a truth more fundamental than the case for rewriting the meaning of food exports and imports.” This truth is that

a million people should not have died in the backyard of what was then the world’s richest nation, and that since a million did perish while two million more fled, this must have been because the political leaders of that nation and the organs of its public opinion had at bottom very ambivalent feelings about the social and economic consequences of mass eviction, mass death and mass emigration. (245).

During the Famine years “too many” upper and middle class Britons came to believe that the regeneration of Ireland could not be accomplished “without a massive amount of short-term suffering and sacrifice” and that, therefore, the suffering was acceptable. It was this perception that both sparked and sustained nationalist indignation at the British response to the catastrophe, and as Donnelly sees it, “[h]istorians do well to remember and to preserve that sense of moral outrage ... as well as the record of what provoked it” (245). With ref-

erence to my own reading of Mitchel in chapter 1, I fully agree with Donnelly's view. In spite of its obvious distortions and excesses, the nationalist interpretation of the Famine cannot, and should not, be dismissed out of hand. And the fundamental truth that Donnelly refers to is consistently recognized in the fictional accounts of O'Flaherty, Macken, and McCabe, even if they do not lay the blame exclusively on the British government.

In their effort to disprove the nationalist claim that the British government was responsible for "the holocaust of humanity" in the Famine years, revisionist historians have insisted that, in view of the magnitude and duration of the crisis, British statesmen and administrators did what they could to provide relief for the starving Irish people. While admitting that the relief efforts were inadequate to prevent large-scale suffering and mortality, they have maintained that this must be seen in the context of prevailing social and economic theories. According to D. George Boyce,

early Victorian government was not in the business of providing state support on any considerable scale, and certainly not enough to cope with the Irish famine; the age of *laissez-faire* was not the age of the welfare state.¹³⁴

Although Boyce notes that "*laissez-faire* was an aspiration rather than a reality", he nevertheless holds that Russell's government was "unable to free itself from the economic orthodoxy of the day." His conclusion is that the genocide charge has no historical justification: "The British government was determined to save as many of the people as it reasonably could – though not at too high a cost."¹³⁵ On this view, post-revisionist historians – most of whom also refute the genocide charge – contending that the government could have done more to stave off the worst consequences of the successive potato failures are discredited on the grounds that they anachronistically project modern standards on past actors. But as Judith Shklar has pointed out,

[t]he free market may, indeed, be as effective as is claimed, but that does not mean that all of its ill effects are above political judgment[.] ... Some may be a result of passive injustice or at least are not beyond human control; some may be too difficult or too costly to change, but expense does not constitute impossibility.¹³⁶

Even if we accept that the government had benevolent intentions, Boyce's conclusion reveals, perhaps inadvertently, that perceived economic necessity took

¹³⁴ D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 109.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹³⁶ Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, p. 75.

precedence over the saving of lives. “[T]he argument of necessity”, as Shklar notes, “is the staple item of ideological discourse everywhere.”¹³⁷

Post-revisionist historians of the Famine have argued that the government’s response to the crisis was conditioned not only by the principles of political economy, but also by the companion ideologies of providentialism and moralism, as well as by the conception of the famine as an opportunity to effect socioeconomic change in Ireland. The work of James Donnelly, Peter Gray, Christine Kinealy and others amply demonstrates how the government employed these ideologies and perceptions to justify their actions or inactions. Furthermore, recent research confirms that the policy of minimal intervention was denounced by many contemporaries – and not only Irish nationalists – who expressed their moral outrage at the government’s parsimony and the inadequacy of the relief measures. In view of this fact, the revisionist caveat that the past should not be judged on the basis of present-day moral standards seems somewhat incongruous. Yet in his preface to *The Great Famine*, Kevin Nowlan writes:

The timidity and remoteness of the administrators in the eighteen-forties may irritate the modern observer who unhesitatingly accepts the moral responsibility of the state to intervene in economic affairs in a time of crisis. But it needs patience to realise that what is obvious and uncontroversial today was dark and confused a century ago to many persons of good will.¹³⁸

If we accept that the historian should strive for objectivity and refrain from passing judgements, the revisionists’ apparent reluctance to engage with the moral implications of the government’s handling of the crisis is perhaps understandable. But where does this position leave the ethical dimension of historical interpretation? Does an understanding of the ideological restrictions under which the administrators laboured also presuppose an acceptance of the moral unaccountability of these officials? Wolfgang Mommsen has pointed out that in the face of traumatic events, “‘understanding’ cannot be the final word, and certainly not in the sense that *tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*.” In these cases, he writes, one necessary task of the historian is “to demarcate the moral responsibility of the actors involved – including those who share in the guilt because of their passivity.” Although historians should not “[sit] in judgment over the past”, they must be “guided by ethical principles of responsibility when approaching [their] topics.” Thus it is their duty

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

¹³⁸ Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. viii.

to make sure that the case [they describe] is presented to the public, and brought into public discourse, without neglecting the moral responsibility involved. This moral dimension cannot be made to disappear by retreating into (pretended or genuine) objectivism.¹³⁹

What Mommsen advocates, then, is “a balanced combination of moral engagement and critical detachment.”¹⁴⁰ Because of their aspiration to objective and dispassionate history-writing, revisionist historians of the Famine have arguably paid too little attention to the ethical dimension of their subject. Consequently, the moral responsibility of the government is downplayed on the contention that it did all that could be expected of it, so that the question of culpability becomes irrelevant. Similarly, the apparent wariness of these historians in regard to emotive and distressing material tends to obscure the central realities of famine – hunger, indignity, disease and death. By contrast, post-revisionist historians have demonstrated that critical detachment need not exclude moral engagement. They argue convincingly that a charge of culpable neglect against the government is justifiable, and conclude that, while it is not possible to blame the government alone, British statesmen and administrators were directly responsible for what they did or failed to do to prevent the catastrophe. The basic considerations supporting this conclusion are summarized by Peter Gray:

[T]he ideas of moralism, supported by Providentialism and ... classical economics, proved the most potent of British interpretations of the Irish Famine. What these led to was not a policy of deliberate genocide, but a dogmatic refusal to recognise that measures intended ‘to encourage industry, to do battle with sloth and despair; to awaken a manly feeling of inward confidence and reliance on the justice of Heaven’, were based on false premises, and in the Irish conditions of the later 1840s amounted to a sentence of death on many thousands.¹⁴¹

Rather than shying away from the horrors of the Famine, post-revisionist historians make an effort to bring the plight of the victims to the fore, especially by highlighting individual cases. The naming of some of the “many thousands” who suffered and died suggests an awareness that it takes more than statistics and generalizations to convey a sense of what the Irish poor endured during the years of famine. Contemplating the state of Famine history in 1997, Tom

¹³⁹ Mommsen, “Moral Commitment and Scholarly Detachment: The Social Function of the Historian”, p. 50.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁴¹ Gray, “Ideology and the Famine”, p. 103.

Dunne concluded that “[t]he victims have yet to be given a voice.”¹⁴² Since the starving and the dispossessed left few records of their experiences behind, the recovery of their voice is no doubt fraught with difficulties in document-based representation. By re-imagining the ordeal of the victims, Famine fiction elucidates this grey zone in the historical record.

¹⁴² Tom Dunne, “Feeling the void within”, *Times Higher Education*, 18 July 1997, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/feeling-the-void-within/159978.article> (9 September 2009).

6. 'THE HISTORY OF THIS WRETCHED ISLAND': Eugene McCabe's *Tales from the Poorhouse*.

In an address to the Clogher Historical society in 2002, the playwright, novelist and short story writer Eugene McCabe (1930 –) spoke about the interweaving of fiction and history. Fiction, he said,

is in a way far removed from the exactness of history; but in another way aims for truth through creativity with all possible imagination, invention, passion, exaggeration and drama. These may seem like opposites to the preciseness of historical research but I believe them to be complementary. There can be 'truth' in fiction, which is just as measurable as truth in history[.] ... [G]ood novels do not distort truth. At their best they magnify and deepen.¹

McCabe did not refer to his own work in order to illustrate his point, yet his *Tales from the Poorhouse* (1999) is a splendid example of how good novels can "magnify and deepen" our understanding of history. Set in a rural community in County Fermanagh in 1848, the book comprises four stories in the form of first-person narratives by the "orphan" Roisin Brady, by the workhouse master, by the local landlord, and by Roisin's mother, Mary Brady. In spite of its title, *Tales from the Poorhouse* is, strictly speaking, not a collection of stories. Although the tales are told successively from the individual perspectives of the four main protagonists, they are not self-contained compositions to be read separately like the short stories of, say, Frank O'Connor, John McGahern or William Trevor. As one reviewer of the volume observed,

each piece has a reflexive relationship with the others, so that characters and incidents are recorded from different angles, and the book becomes much more than the sum of its constituent parts.²

Even if McCabe has rejected the epic structure favoured by Liam O'Flaherty and Walter Macken, the unity, whether in terms of characters, setting, themes, motifs or plot, and the social breadth of his "tales" seem at odds with his chosen title. If the aim of the novel is to create a comprehensive, unified effect, then *Tales from the Poorhouse* is, in essence, a novel. And yet reviewers of the book have generally failed to recognize or acknowledge this. While noting that the stories are interlinked, the handful of reviews I have been able to unearth con-

¹ Eugene McCabe, "Golden Jubilee Address to the Clogher Historical Society", *Clogher Record*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2002), pp. 839-51 [843].

² Des Traynor, "Carrying on", *Books Ireland*, no. 224 (September 1999), pp. 223-24 [223].

vey no sense of the novelistic character of the book (although the one quoted above hints at it).³

In 2004, a selection of McCabe's prose spanning almost thirty years was published in a collection entitled *Heaven Lies About Us: Stories*. The volume contained the four poorhouse tales and eight additional stories, among them "Victims." That story was originally published in 1976 as *Victims: A Tale from Fermanagh*, winning the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, which was awarded for the best regional *novel* of the year. In his review of the book, Benedict Kiely referred to it as a novel, while other commentators have seen it as either a novel or a novella. In *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, it is designated a novel.⁴ Nevertheless, with the publication of *Heaven Lies About Us*, *Victims* as well as *Tales from the Poorhouse* were entrenched in the short story genre. Neither *Victims* nor *Tales from the Poorhouse* is mentioned in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, nor in Derek Hand's survey *A History of the Irish Novel*.⁵ Thus McCabe's reputation as a novelist now rests on his *Death and Nightingales* (1992), a historical novel set in rural Fermanagh in 1883 and, like *Victims*, spanning one single day and night. Yet apart from myself, there is at least one more commentator who would categorize *Tales from the Poorhouse*, too, as a novel rather than as a set of interlinked stories. In his doctoral dissertation, Jerome Joseph Day writes:

Rich in shifts in time, perspective and mood, the novel creates four distinct Famine voices that echo, reinforce and subvert each other. Each voice is necessary in order to understand the others, and no single voice [is] sufficient to tell the full story.⁶

So even though the title of the book signals short stories, its content and form point to the novel.

A possible explanation for McCabe's choice of title is probably that the stories were originally commissioned by RTÉ and Teilifís na Gaeilge. According

³ See for example Eileen Battersby, "The language of rage", *Irish Times*, Weekend, 8 May 1999; Dermot Bolger, "A walk in the Famine fields", *Irish Independent*, 20 June 1999.

⁴ Benedict Kiely, "A Family Affair", *Irish Times*, 20 November 1976; Bolger, "A walk in the Famine fields"; Rüdiger Imhof, Review of Eugene McCabe, *Christ in the Fields*, in *Linen Hall Review*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1993), p. 23; John Kenny, "A tale of cloister and heart", *Irish Times*, 14 March 2009; Robert Welch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 326.

⁵ John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006); Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011).

⁶ Jerome Joseph Day, "An Analysis of Irish Famine Texts, 1845-2000: The Discursive Uses of Hunger", Diss., McGill University, 2001. http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=d-bin-jump-full&object_id=37883&local_base=GEN01-MCG02 (24 February 2010).

to the preview in the *Irish Times*, they were adapted for the small screen by McCabe himself “from four, originally lengthier short stories of his own”, and the scripts were translated into Irish by John McArdle. Filmed as “separate one-person plays, straight to camera”, they were broadcast in weekly instalments, first in Irish and then in English, during the autumn of 1998.⁷ “Tales” as part of the title of a television series seems wholly appropriate, but it is arguably not very apt for a publication which is, in effect, a novel. As David Lodge has pointed out, the title of a novel (or, for that matter, of any book, whether fiction or non-fiction) “is part of the text – the first part of it, in fact, that we encounter – and therefore has considerable power to attract and condition the reader’s attention.”⁸ So the word “tales” in McCabe’s title may not attract the attention of aficionados of the novel who, perhaps, do not care for short stories, with the possible result that the book does not gain the large readership it, in my opinion, deserves. On the other hand, prospective readers would find that there is more to these tales than meets the eye by simply consulting the blurb, which describes the book as

[a] suite of plangent monologues [that] places in counterpoint the stories of a mother and her daughter (the ‘orphan’ of these tales), a landlord, and the Master of a workhouse in mid-19th century Ireland.⁹

This description suggests that these stories, placed “in counterpoint”, amount to a narrative whole in which each part assumes the form of a chapter in a novel. If the publisher recognized the novelistic character of McCabe’s work, it could hardly have escaped the author. So why did he retain the ostensibly misleading “tales” in the title of the published version? That question can probably be answered only by McCabe himself.

Another potentially problematic aspect of McCabe’s title is the phrase “from the Poorhouse.” While Roisin and her mother are inmates of the institution, the master and the landlord are obviously not. Consequently, this part of the title might seem misleading since only two of the stories are told distinctly from within the poorhouse. Yet the master, too, tells his story from inside the house. Although not an inmate himself, Lonan Reginald Murphy resides within its walls and is in daily contact with the paupers. Stricken by grief and remorse at having turned away his own sister when she sought refuge in the house, he feels that to atone for this betrayal, he must exchange his position as master for that of a pauper: “I have been Master here for three years and here I must

⁷ Mic Moroney, “Bleak House”, *Irish Times*, Weekend, 3 October 1998.

⁸ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 193.

⁹ Eugene McCabe, *Tales from the Poorhouse* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1999).

admit myself under Hanratty, as Master. That would be fitting. That would be punishment.”¹⁰ Thus the “real” poorhouse becomes a potential destination for Murphy, at least in his own mind. Similarly, Lord Clonroy, whose story emerges from his diary, sees himself as destined for a poorhouse, although not necessarily of the kind inhabited by his destitute former tenants. Faced with bankruptcy and the apparent refusal of Dorothy (Dot), née Knoggs, his wealthy English wife, to bail him out, he is forced to put his estate on the market. Unlike her husband, who “despite famine, horror and hatred” would “choose to die and be buried” in his native place (75), Dot has no attachment to either Ireland or Eden Hall. “If you can’t make this property pay”, she tells him, “we should sell and go to Birmingham.” The idea of ending his days “somewhere like Eden Place, Daddy George’s mock baronial edifice”, is abhorrent to Clonroy: “Let me not think on it!” (90). As he contemplates his future, there seem to be only two options:

Brutal worldly truth. A man of meagre banking account is of no account. So dance to her jig, me Lord, and be happy you’re not a bare-arsed pauper starving in a poorhouse. Murphy’s mad solution. Become a pauper myself! In a way I am. Pauperised. (91)

Birmingham or a pauper’s ward – poorhouses both, whether perceived or real.

Even if Clonroy’s Eden Hall is not a literal poorhouse, for him it has become one in a figurative sense. No less than the paupers’ material existence is subject to the constraints imposed by the workhouse Board of Guardians and, by extension, the government, Clonroy’s is dependent on his wife who holds the purse strings. His alienation from both Dot and Mathew, his son, mirrors the segregation of families within the poorhouse. When Mathew leaves Eden Hall for the last time, Clonroy’s reaction suggests that he will eventually experience the same trauma of separation as a pauper faces when, on entering the workhouse, his family is broken up:¹¹ “Will I see him again, in this world? Doubtful. Do I want to? Doubtful. Must be heartbreak in that but can’t feel it. Yet” (102). And if the workhouse inmates are living in prison-like conditions, then so is Clonroy, even though his prison is at least partially of his own making. His demesne is fenced in by “miles of enclosing wall” (88), patrolled by henchmen with watchdogs, and the house is fitted with steel shutters: “My German shep-

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 70. Subsequent references to this edition are included parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ On entering the workhouse, families were segregated, “fathers and sons going into the male quarters, mothers and daughters into the female section; children over two years were separated from their parents and sent to the children’s ward.” O’Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, p. 85.

herds a must for night watches, and my steel shutters and gun room with its cast iron door. A necessity. Siege clobber of caste” (86). Because Eden Hall is “besieged” by hostile and starving Irish peasants, Clonroy feels a prisoner in his own home – a home in which his role as master seems to have been usurped by his wife:

[O]ut there, beyond our walls, out of sight, but never out of mind, that swarming otherness, that Irishness, their hatred fuelled by disease, famine, and death. Out there is hell. In here, where I live, is heaven! Is it? Life with Field Marshal Knoggs! (90-91)

In his last diary entry, there is a sense of total confinement: “The house seemed like a prison, all that careful building, the accumulation of centuries, tumbling now like a house of cards” (103). The sale of the estate will relieve him of this “prison” only to place him in the next one, with “Field Marshal Knoggs” as warden.

The Master begins his story – which he refers to as a “memoir” or “part confession and part explanation” (37) for why he disowned his sister Annie – by recalling how the two of them were orphaned at the ages of eight and four respectively. “Was it,” he wonders,

the grief of that double loss [of mother and father] that’s made me cold seeming to common compassion, indifferent almost to the dying I have to accommodate daily in this union of death? (36)

Shortly after the loss of his parents, he is separated from his sister, who is taken in by an aunt living in County Longford. Murphy himself is “fostered out” to the Fergusons, a childless couple on a valley farm in County Fermanagh, and he is never to see Annie again until the day she turns up at the door of his workhouse thirty years later. Having lost his family, he gradually forms an attachment to his foster-parents, and especially to the farm:

There were a hundred freehold acres at Derrylester of well fenced, well laid-out fields, a sound, cut stone house, yards and barns, an orchard garden, half a mile of trout river, a ten-acre lake, an artesian well eighty feet deep in the flagged dairy and a herd of fifty shorthorn cattle, roans, reds and blues, that took prizes for milk and beef wherever they were shown. It was near paradise, to my mind. (53)

Encouraged by his foster-father’s telling him that “you’re more to me than a son, you must know that”, he nurtures the dream of inheriting the farm while working on it “as an unpaid steward, eighteen years of hard work” (53). That dream is shattered when, on Sam Ferguson’s death, it transpires that he has

willed the farm to his nephew in Australia who, presumably, has never set foot in Ireland. The disappointment leaves Murphy embittered:

My life was half gone. I'd bided my time for a dream, for nothing[.] ... Since then I expect nothing from anyone, take what's my due and more if it's safe. The thing nearest to my heart was suddenly gone, like our mother and father, in thirteen words: 'To my nephew, Richard Ferguson, I leave the farmland and house at Derrylester.' (55)

By his own admission, this disappointment makes him both “unkind” and “dead to feeling.” Numbed by personal loss, Murphy shuts himself into an emotional poorhouse apparently devoid of compassion, kindness and affection for anyone or anything. “It was,” he decides, “the only way to function in this world. Never again would I allow life to betray me as it had” (55). Poverty of one kind or another, then, mars the lives of both Clonroy and Murphy. The expression “from the Poorhouse” in McCabe’s title seems justified since it can be read both literally and metaphorically.

When the printed version of *Tales from the Poorhouse* appeared in 1999, the reviews were full of praise. Des Traynor described it as a work which

subtly chronicle[s] the devastating cost of the Great Irish Famine in terms of the real, unremitting, everyday human suffering it visited on the lives of ordinary – and not so ordinary – people, both those it pauperised, and those in more privileged positions.

In dealing with the “horrendous experiences” of the Famine, Traynor wrote, McCabe “walk[s] a tightrope which threatens to plunge him into mere sentimentality”, and yet he manages to avoid this danger “by a quiet intensity and dignity.” In conclusion, Traynor found the book “a mesmerising work, which merits that much abused because overused term, masterpiece.”¹² Eileen Battersby, too, noted the total absence of sentimentality in the tales, which she labelled “a stark quartet of prose poems” and “a brave work.” Her review emphasized the complexities of McCabe’s narrative as he delves into the histories of his characters, their interrelationships, their social disparities, and their efforts to cope with personal tragedies in the shadow of the Famine:

Contrasting – and indeed, conflicting – tones emerge from within monologues which range from defiant protest to heart-crazed lamentation[.] ... In a narrative constructed upon a series of complex, often violent, tensions, McCabe explores these individual dilemmas while also placing them in their historical context. Class and culture, peasant and landlord, male and female,

¹² Traynor, “Carrying on”, pp. 223-24.

mother and daughter, youth and age; and death is juxtaposed with survival and flight.

The resulting stories, she declared, “are virtuoso performances in which McCabe explores layers of language demonstrating a richness, subtlety and a range of textures and emotions seldom achieved in fiction.”¹³

Although Battersby mentions the historical context, she does not elaborate on McCabe’s representation of the Famine. That event is clearly a catalyst in the lives of his characters, and their “individual dilemmas” are as contingent on the famine disaster as on their personal histories. Battersby notes that “the Landlord reveals a great deal about the society which made him and the new order which is now rejecting his class”, yet many of his diary entries also concern the Famine, its causes as he perceives them, its consequences, and the question of responsibility. Mother Brady’s story, although largely an account of her personal history, provides a contrast to Lord Clonroy’s view in regard to culpability as she unequivocally blames England, the landlord, and his “hired brutes” for the devastating consequences of the potato failure. Famine transforms young Roisin’s life into a nearly hopeless struggle for survival which eventually forces her into prostitution, while Murphy’s narrative exposes the horrors of the workhouse: overcrowding, filth and rags, disease and death – all on account of famine. These and many other elements of Famine as well as pre-Famine history are seamlessly woven into the fabric of the personal histories emerging from each of the four narratives. Yet on returning to the tales in her review of *Heaven Lies About Us*, Battersby complains that “[i]n the pieces narrated by the poorhouse master and the landlord, historical detail overwhelms the individual stories and renders them surprisingly artificial.”¹⁴ I find this unsupported comment baffling, not to say inexplicable. In McCabe’s fictional world, the personal histories of his characters are inextricably linked with “the history of this wretched island”, as Lord Clonroy puts it (103). These histories constitute the interacting narrative strands that provide the framework for the author’s exploration of blame, guilt, denial, religious zealotry, dysfunctional families, colonialism, and social hierarchies. In this same review, Battersby delivers another unsubstantiated claim, declaring that McCabe’s “preoccupation with history” is “polemical.” If the word polemical is taken to mean controversial, the reviewer does have a point insofar as many aspects of Famine history, among them the question of responsibility, are still

¹³ Battersby, “The language of rage.”

¹⁴ Eileen Battersby, “Powerful polemics motivated by injustice”, *Irish Times*, Weekend, 15 January 2005.

matters of contention and critical re-assessment.¹⁵ But to say that a piece of writing is polemical is also to suggest that it is dogmatically argumentative, and/or that the author attempts to impose his or her own views on readers. I do not consider McCabe's representation of Irish history polemical in this sense.

P.J. Mathews has observed that "[s]etting a story in the historical past of the Irish Famine is a brave, if somewhat risky, strategy for any novelist."¹⁶ Given the politically charged subject matter, the "risky" part of engaging with Famine history in the novel involves the question of how to represent it without, in the words of Gerry Smyth, "losing focus on the primary principle of the form – narrative – in the wish to polemicize and to intervene actively in contemporary debate."¹⁷ In contrast to *Tales from the Poorhouse*, authorial intrusions reflecting the writer's ideological position are particularly noticeable in nineteenth-century novels dealing with the Famine. William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* is a case in point. As Derek Hand notes,

[t]hroughout the novel, Carleton, as author, intrudes upon the narrative to make clear his analysis of the problems besetting Ireland: it is the failure of the British government, the failure, as he says, of the law.¹⁸

Carleton condemns "strong farmers" hoarding for profit, as well as misers and meal-mongers who "prey upon the distress and destitution of the poor." Yet at the same time, he implies that these abuses are a result of the government's refusal to prohibit exports and to interfere in the market. He remarks on the "extraordinary fact" of "Irish provisions, drawn from a population perishing with actual hunger" being shipped out of the country, while "other vessels came in freighted with our own provisions, sent back, through the charity of England, to our relief." This reference to the apparent anomaly of food being exported from a country facing starvation is followed by an ironic comment which betrays Carleton's critical view of government policy:

It is not our business, anymore than it is our inclination, to dwell here upon the state of those sumptuary enactments which reflected such honour upon

¹⁵ See for example David P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), and Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845-1852* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁶ P.J. Mathews, Review of Joseph O'Connor's work, <http://www.josephoconnorauthor.com/review-of-joseph-oconnors-work-by-dr-pj-mathews.html> (12 October 2011).

¹⁷ Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 35.

¹⁸ Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel*, p. 96.

the legislative wisdom that permitted our country to arrive at the lamentable condition we have attempted to describe. We merely mention the facts.¹⁹

Like Mitchel, Carleton sees the famine as an artificial one, with the difference that, for him, it is created by the monopoly of “provision dealers of all kinds.” Nevertheless, the government is implicated as the agent ultimately responsible for this state of affairs: “[S]urely these circumstances ought not to be permitted, so long as we have a deliberate legislature, whose duty it is to watch and guard the health and morals of the people.”²⁰

D.P. Conyngham’s *The O’Donnells of Glen Cottage* is arguably the most blatantly polemical Famine novel of the nineteenth century. Using an authorial “we” or “I”, Conyngham intermittently disrupts the narrative flow with historical explanations that reveal a strong nationalist bias. In a chapter entitled “A New Lesson on the Treatment of Famine”, for instance, the author indulges in a lengthy attack on the British government which reads like something straight out of Mitchel’s *The Last Conquest of Ireland* or his *Jail Journal*. As Conyngham sees it,

[the] potato blight and consequent famine were powerful engines of state to uproot millions of the peasantry, to preserve law and order, and to clear off surplus population, and to maintain the integrity of the British empire.²¹

This statement may not constitute a full-blown genocide charge in the spirit of Mitchel, but it does come close. Conyngham further maintains that although the produce of the country during these years “was capable of supporting double its population”, it was annually exported to England “to the amount of about seventeen millions sterling” while “the Irish were starving at home.” In return for this export, he writes, “we got Coercion Bills, Arms Acts, and the like.” The Labour Rate Act is described as “an engine of destruction” which “impoverished the rich without benefiting the poor” because the money advanced by the government was “wasted on unproductive works” and

spent in testing political economy and practical philosophy; in building soup-houses and erecting boilers; in levelling hills; and in extending government patronage by employing commissioners, inspectors, clerks, overseers, and the like, of whom there were no less than 10,000 salaried out of money given as loans and grants for the poor. This is the way the money went, and the poor were left to starve!!²²

¹⁹ Carleton, *The Black Prophet*, pp. 188-89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21.

²¹ D.P. Conyngham, *The O’Donnells of Glen Cottage: A Tale of the Famine Years in Ireland* [1861] (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1903), p. 275.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 276-78.

As the narrative progresses, the tone of these authorial intrusions becomes more insistent, at times bordering on the coercive. In a subsequent chapter, Conyngham gives his readers a lesson on the working of the Poor Law, where he forcefully states his own view of the matter: "I fearlessly assert that the poor laws have destroyed the happiness and independence of the very poor for whose benefit they were created."²³ The above are just a few examples of the commentary that infuses Conyngham's novel with a nationalist propaganda better suited for a political pamphlet.

If Carleton and Conyngham blamed the British government for failing to prevent the worst consequences of the potato failures, Anthony Trollope did not. In his second letter to the *Examiner* in March, 1850, Trollope expressed his belief that

the measures adopted by the Government in Ireland ... were actively tending to save the country, and ... the new poor law, accursed as it is by the Irish gentry, was the surest step towards that salvation.²⁴

This belief is repeated, more than once, in his novel *Castle Richmond*. "[I]n my opinion", he writes in his authorial voice, "the measures of the government were prompt, wise, and beneficent." Arguing that the government "were responsible for the preservation of the people" and that they "acknowledged their responsibility", he concludes: "I shall always think – as I did think then – that the wisdom of its action and the wisdom of its abstinence from action were very good."²⁵ Thus the notion that the Famine might have been man-made in Mitchel's sense is never entertained in the novel. Instead, Trollope blames "a class who looked to be gentlemen", living on the properties of absentee landlords and thriving on "profit-rent" derived from the sub-letting of land. This system of landholding, created and perpetuated by a class of idlers, left the lower classes "in the abjectivity of poverty", a situation that was ostensibly rectified by the event of the Famine. "It is with thorough rejoicing, almost with triumph", Trollope writes,

that I declare that the idle, genteel class has been cut up root and branch, has been driven out of its holding into the wide world, and has been punished with the penalty of extermination. The poor cotter suffered sorely under the famine, and under the pestilence which followed the famine; but he, as a class, has risen from his bed of suffering a better man.²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 439.

²⁴ Trollope, *Six Letters to the Examiner*, p. 8.

²⁵ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, pp. 62, 179, 311.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

For Trollope, as for Charles Trevelyan, “the destruction of the potato was the work of God”, but the blight was a manifestation of “his mercy” rather than of his anger. Ireland “had been brought to the dust by man’s folly”, and “a merciful God sent the remedy ... which brought [the country] out of its misfortunes.”²⁷ Margaret Kelleher has argued that “Trollope’s discourse on famine’s causation contains some curious contradictions, particularly in relation to the characters within its own story.”²⁸ There is indeed a tension between the teller and the tale that reveals a certain lack of conviction on Trollope’s part in regard to his own views, yet the tale’s attempt to acknowledge the role of politics and economics in the Famine disaster is too tentative to be convincing. The “I” of *Castle Richmond* may be less assured than the author of the letters to the *Examiner*, but the wish to polemicize is still there. In the closing pages of the novel, Trollope reasserts his providential explanation of the Famine:

If one did in truth write a tale of the famine, after that it would behove the author to write a tale of the pestilence; and then another, a tale of the exodus. These three wonderful events, following each other, were the blessings coming from Omniscience and Omnipotence by which the black clouds were driven from the Irish firmament[.] ... And then the same author going on with his series would give in his last set, – Ireland in her prosperity.²⁹

Echoing Trevelyan’s declaration that “supreme wisdom has educed permanent good out of transient evil,”³⁰ Trollope refutes the view of contemporary observers like William Bennett, Asenath Nicholson, Bishop Hughes, and many others who argued that the government sought to evade responsibility for the catastrophe by ascribing it to the hand of God.

As I noted in Chapter 2, Liam O’Flaherty, too, is occasionally tempted to pontificate about the government’s role in the Famine disaster. Yet while the author is inclined to blame the British authorities, the events and characters of his story contradict such an interpretation. O’Flaherty, then, exemplifies the non-coercive, negatively capable author, and as a result, his famine novel is characterized by what Eve Patten has termed “a purposeful inconclusiveness” in regard to the question of responsibility.³¹ This inconclusiveness, or uncertainty, is evident also in McCabe’s novel, where no particular individual, group or authority is ultimately singled out for blame. McCabe’s chosen form, the

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 58, 59, 61.

²⁸ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 44.

²⁹ Trollope, *Castle Richmond*, p. 438.

³⁰ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, p. 1.

³¹ Eve Patten, “Contemporary Irish Fiction”, in Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, pp. 259-75 [261].

dramatic monologue, precludes direct evaluative commentary by the author. The ideological perspectives, insofar as they are obvious, are those of the autonomous, first-person character-narrators who tell their stories without the interference or interpretative influence of a distanced, external narrator. Thus whatever polemic emerges from the four narratives is not necessarily ascribable to the author.

6.1. Famine, dreams and nightmares

“History”, declared Stephen Daedalus, “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”³² For McCabe’s four protagonists, part of the nightmare is the present, the here and now of the unfolding history of the Great Famine. As famine becomes a constant in seventeen-year-old Roisin Brady’s life, she has to cope with poverty, perpetual hunger, loss of family and, finally, consignment to the workhouse. Driven by her refusal to succumb to adversity, she resembles Mary Kilmartin in O’Flaherty’s novel. By focusing on Roisin’s struggle and her determination to survive, McCabe subverts the image of apathetic famine victims resigned to their fate recurrent in contemporary accounts. The Bradys, occupiers of a ten-acre farm on Lord Clonroy’s estate, exemplify the class of smallholders that was hit hard by the successive potato failures. As Roisin explains, “when the blight came and rotted them [the potatoes] in the ground the cow had to be sold. Then the fowl were eaten” (13). This leaves the family with nothing to fall back on. Roisin’s father, Tom, has been earning a modest income from his tailoring, but with famine in the land, there is no longer any demand for his services: “He was a countryman’s tailor”, Roisin tells us,

but people had long since quit liftin’ the latch. Like every other trade there was no money, only the promise of money. At fairs and gatherin’s he was often, he said, at a loss. Men would order a swallow-tailed coat maybe, or britches, or a workin’ waistcoat, and never come back to the lodgin’s he worked out of. (12)

With the family facing starvation, Tom begins to entertain the notion of taking himself off for good, ostensibly in order to give the rest of the family – Roisin, her twin sister, Grace, her brother, Miclín, and their mother – a better chance of survival:

He said there was no way we’d get through the winter alive without a spud kind and every bird and beast about the place long gone. We’d be better off without him. There would be that much more to eat for the rest of us. (12)

³² Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 42.

When Tom Brady eventually abandons his family, Roisin feels obliged to shoulder the responsibility of providing for them:

With Dada long gone, no money, nothin' in the house but ten days of stirabout, nothin' in our fields but cabbage stumps and nothin' but a cock's step between us and the poorhouse I began to wonder what I could do to get money in my fist to feed us all. (19)

The repetition of the word “nothin” emphasizes the gravity of their situation, which is further exacerbated by the fact that the old tradition of the poor helping the poor can no longer be upheld. The situation McCabe is representing was described by the parish priest Malachy Duggan in May 1847. “The people”, he wrote,

however well disposed and ready to respond to the calls of charity, are not able to give ... even the smallest relief, for such as were hitherto in comparatively comfortable circumstances, their private resources being exhausted from purchasing food during the year at an exorbitant price, are now reduced to a level with almost the most destitute.³³

Roisin is fully aware of the increasing destitution surrounding her: “[N]o neighbours could help out. We were all in the one boat and it goin' down” (31). With the public works long shut down, no government soup kitchens to turn to, and no possibility of outdoor relief since the family occupies ten acres, Roisin has only one option left – their rich neighbour, Lord Clonroy.

In 1849, William Power, a young army officer supervising drainage work on an estate in County Monaghan, was struck by the glaring inequality that marked Irish society. “It seems strange”, he wrote in his diary,

that such wealth and luxury should be so near a neighbour of starvation and misery and that splendor and luxury should exist within sight of the squalid hut where fever and starvation are doing their work. There is something rotten in the state where such things can be. The social contract is broken[.] ... Society is guilty of a great crime where it allows a single one of its members to die of want while so many around are rioting in wasteful luxury.³⁴

McCabe highlights this social and economic inequality by juxtaposing poverty with affluence. The Bradys' now barren “wee garden of a farm” (19) is situated next to Lord Clonroy's twenty-acre turnip field. That field, double the size of the Brady farm, accounts for only a fraction of Clonroy's twenty-thousand acre estate. While Roisin and her family go hungry since their farm yields nothing,

³³ Quoted in Ó Cathaoir, *Famine Diary*, p. 116.

³⁴ Quoted in MacDonald, *A Time of Desolation*, p. 101.

Clonroy's large crop of turnips is fed to his sheep and cattle. Although the roots have long since been dug up, Roisin knows that there might still be some left in the ground, and if she can manage to gather these, they will provide at least temporary sustenance.

As both folklore and contemporary accounts reveal, gleaning – the stripping of turnip or potato fields of leftovers after the harvest – was a common practice among the starving poor during the years of famine. When Roisin climbs over the wall into Clonroy's field and starts "hokin' and gatherin'" (19), she becomes the personification of the "famished crows" and "cowering wretches", scavenging for food in near-empty fields, described by contemporaries like John Mitchel, Edmond Wynne, and James Mahony. Although these observers were obviously disturbed by what they saw, they remained outside the experience of the gleaners. Consequently, there is a sense of distance separating witness and victim in their accounts which might impede empathy in readers. As Margaret Kelleher has argued, "[f]or all their graphic and shocking qualities, many aspects of famine images serve to remove rather than establish immediacy."³⁵ In McCabe's fiction, by contrast, the monologue form reinforces immediacy as it allows us to observe "reality" through the eyes of the characters and, in the words of Colm Tóibín, to "enter into their spirit."³⁶ The first-person singular becomes what Tóibín calls "first-person intimate", enabling us to sense the world of the characters *as if* it were our own. The narrative mode thus promotes an empathetic engagement – though by no means always an uncritical one – with the circumstances and dilemmas of the characters.

Roisin's first two nocturnal forays into Clonroy's turnip field are successful, and she returns each time with "a bag of crow-pecked, half-frosted roots" which her mother fries "with a little pig fat." Despite the obvious meagerness of this repast, Roisin declares that the turnips "were so delicious they made our heads light" (19). She never complains of hunger, and only once does she mention the fact that the family is on the verge of starvation. Her sister Grace, she tells us, "had the white face of a half-starved girl", and although they "were all like ghosts", Grace "was by far the poorest and whitest of ghosts" (24). These descriptions of famine victims and of the giddiness that the mere taste of a few scraps of miserable food leads to speak volumes about the ravages of extreme, unappeased hunger. But as Roisin soon finds out, not even scraps are to be had for nothing. Emboldened by the success of her initial gleaning ventures,

³⁵ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 229.

³⁶ Quoted in Alex Witchel, "His Irish Diaspora," *New York Times Magazine*, 3 May 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/magazine/2/03toibin-t.html?pagewanted=all> (25 January 2012).

she becomes reckless the third time out, going into the middle of the big field in bright moonlight. As her presence is detected by Clonroy's watchdogs, she realizes just how dangerous her situation is:

I heard first the chains and then the growlin' of wolfdogs. They must have smelled me and for a few seconds of terror my heart stopped entirely. I could hear a henchman shoutin',

– Gwon, gwon, gettim, boy, gettim!

I knew that Wishy Mulligan's throat was ripped out by those dogs. Then I was runnin' as I'd never run in my life and was over the wall a brave few minutes before the dogs came howlin' up to where I'd crossed. (19-20)

Roisin admits that “the fright was bad”, though this seems something of an understatement in light of the heart-stopping feeling of terror she describes. Yet for her, “the loss of the turnips was worse” (20) than the nightmarish experience – a telling indication that hunger has become a dominant factor in her life. I find this scene as rendered by McCabe much more powerful and conducive to empathy than the mere descriptions of gleaners penned by contemporaries who observed them from a distance. The perspective in McCabe's representation enables a virtual experience – that is, an experience in effect, though not in fact – which that in contemporary accounts generally fails to do.

Although Roisin tends to belittle the fright she got in the turnip field, it was bad enough to dissuade her from any further attempts at gleanings. Yet her will to survive demands new strategies, and she comes up with the “mad idea” (21) of running alongside the carriages of visitors to Eden Hall in the hope that the wealthy travellers will throw out a few coins for her. As “mad” as it may seem, this practice was apparently not uncommon among youngsters during the Famine years. In his *Gleanings from the West of Ireland*, Sidney Godolphin Osborne describes the phenomenon as he witnessed it while travelling to Westport with a friend in 1849. “We had an instance”, he writes,

of the wonderful way in which the Irish can, in hopes of ever so small a gift, sustain exertion in the practice of ‘running.’ A girl of about twelve years of age, of course barefooted; dressed in a man's old coat, closely buttoned; ran beside our car, going at times very fast; ... she did not ask for anything, but with hands crossed, kept an even pace, only adapting it, to our accidental change of speed; we, as a rule, refused all professional mendicants; we told her again and again, we would give her nothing; she never asked for anything; I saw my friend melting, I from time to time tried to congeal him, by using arguments against encouraging bad habits, & c. He was firm, astonished at her powers, not so irritated, as I was, by her silent, wearying importunity; on she went, as we went; he shook his head at her; every quar-

ter of a mile I thought the said shake softened in its negative character; I read fresh lectures on the evil of being led from right principles, by appeals to our pity, through the exhibition of what excited our wonder; the naked spokes of those naked legs, still seemed to turn in some mysterious harmony, with our wheels; on, on she went ever by our side, using her eyes only to pick her way, never speaking, not even looking at us; she won the day – she got very hot, coughed – but still ran with undiminished speed; my companion gave way – that cough did it, he gave her a fourpenny; I confess I forgave him – it was hard earned, though by a bad sort of industry.³⁷

This passage discloses a marked lack of empathy on the part of the spectators. They take it for granted that the girl is a “professional” beggar and that, therefore, giving her alms would be contrary to “right principles” and an encouragement to “bad habits.” Osborne is “irritated” by her “wearying importunity”, while his friend is simply “astonished at her powers.” That astonishment eventually turns into “pity” aroused by the girl’s coughing. Pity prompts the offering of a coin, but Osborne himself has no empathetic understanding of the girl’s strategy for survival – “a bad sort of industry” – or of the humiliation it may have involved for her.

In McCabe’s rendition of the running scene, the focus is on Roisin’s experience rather than on the perceptions and sentiments of the spectators, as is the case in Osborne’s account. Roisin’s description of her race against Lord Clonroy’s carriage is unsentimental, yet poignant and conducive to empathy as it imparts a sense of her great exertion, of her anguish at near defeat, of her ultimate triumph, but also of her humiliation and shame. Undaunted by the coachman’s roaring at her to “get the hell out of the way” and Mathew Clonroy’s dismissive gestures from inside the carriage, she keeps up with “the slow gallop of the horses”, increasing her speed as the coachman puts the whip to “the poor creatures” (21-22). Yet in spite of her declaration that “I was still runnin’ easy enough, and plenty left”, the exertion takes its toll:

At that very moment I felt blood on my thighs and knew what had happened. Then something caught my foot. I fell down on my face. I knew they had all seen me fall but if they did they saw me get up as quick. I was still level but my nose was bloody. I was half glad of that because maybe they’d only see that and not the other. Inside in myself I felt I was like a childeen who’d fallen and can’t get breath because the hurt is so painful. I was tempted to stop but I must have that pride my mother has. (22)

³⁷ Osborne, *Gleanings from the West of Ireland*, pp. 91-92.

Her refusal to admit defeat pays off as Mathew and his companions, finally relenting, throw out a few coins onto the road. For Roisin, this is a triumph, but at a price:

Five sixpences. Enough to buy two weeks' India meal. I stopped. The carriage drew away. My hands, in truth my whole body, were tremblin'. There was a taste of blood and sweat in my mouth. I went straight off the avenue into a copse of oak trees and sat on the ground. I realised then I could hardly breathe. (22-23)

At the end of her ordeal, Roisin is understandably enough reduced to tears, yet she is confused by her own reaction. Angry with herself for "whingein' like a two-year-old", she puts her crying fit down to a sense of relief:

Hadn't I two full shillin's and sixpence in the linin' of my shift? Maybe it was the relief of knowin' we could hold off from the poorhouse a while longer and I hadn't held out my hand to whine like a beggar.

In spite of her insistence that she has not begged, she is troubled by the thought that she has humiliated herself in front of the travellers and that, in their eyes, her running has in fact appeared as an act of beggary:

I'd run proud with my head up, but I'd fallen. Dear Jesus, I'd fallen on my mouth and nose and maybe it was that fall and the knowledge of what was happenin' below under the eyes of high bred young men and women. Through my patched rags they must have seen the bareness of poverty. Was that what caused them to drop out the biteens of silver? I burned with shame thinkin' of this. (23)

As Roisin seems to realize, it is hardly admiration for her running feat but more likely a condescending pity for her abject poverty that induced the travellers to open their purses, and it is this realization, much more than her relief, that brings on weeping and a feeling of shame. As noted earlier, even if contemporary observers could sympathize with the victims of famine, they were for the most part unable to empathize with them. Consequently, their accounts evoke pity for the afflicted poor but fail to convey any understanding of how they may have experienced their own situation. By contrast, through his imaginative reconstruction of Roisin's ordeals in the turnip field and on the avenue, McCabe enables readers to empathize with the famine victim, to gain an understanding of the humiliation and shame involved in scavenging and begging for survival rather than for mere gain, and of the courage and determination it must have taken to resort to such desperate measures.

Another significant factor adding to Roisin's Famine nightmare is the gradual disintegration of her family for which, justifiably or not, she blames her mother, Mary. "When the hard hunger reached us", she explains, "the Mother went half cracked, blamin' Dada for near everythin', the landlord, the agent, the pig dyin', the leaky thatch, even the blight itself" (11). The underlying reason for this blame is that, when famine hits, Tom Brady is unable to provide for his family because he is a bad tailor and a drunkard to boot. With the family facing starvation, Roisin tells us, her mother would scream at him:

You have a wife and three childer to feed now, Tom Brady. Have you no shame to be gulpin' and pissin' the most of it [his earnings] in a ditch! It's horsewhipped you should be, and drunkards like you. (13)

While angrily rebuking her husband for his apparent habit of spending money needed for food on drink, Mary also gives vent to her contempt for his efforts at tailoring: "What customer'd pay for clothes so illmade a monkey wouldn't wear them for fear of bein' laughed at!" (12). All this "tonguing", as Roisin calls it, only leads to more drinking and more inferior work:

Then he'd leave the house for days. When he'd come back we could tell he was drinkin' from his dead eyes and senseless talk. Thing is, he could measure, cut and sew, but he was careless or maybe the drink would put a tremble in his fingers and that made a *prácás* [mess] of the work he was at. (13)

Although Roisin is aware of her father's drinking problem and admits that this makes him "a poor enough tailor" (12), she attributes his deterioration to her mother's relentless castigation, which he is "too weakly to face up to" (11). As far as she can tell, her parents "were happy enough in the early years with a bit of land and the tailorin'" (13), but their relationship is now ruined by Tom's admittedly irresponsible behaviour and by Mary's constant recriminations. Yet Roisin and her sister Grace both feel sorry for their father, while from Mary's point of view, there is no call for this: "Poor Dada, poor Dada, them silly girls never quit with their Poor Dada" (114). Her arranged marriage to Tom was "a bad match", she declares:

From the start his trade kept him away, mostly at fairs, or in a tailor's workshop up about Dundalk. Always the smell of whiskey off him when he came back. And the poor mouth. And the excuses. And no money ever. (113-14)

Is Tom Brady then the inveterate, useless drunk his wife makes him out to be, or is he the "poor Dada" driven to seek solace in alcohol because of her scorn and rebuke? Is one or both of them to blame for the situation the family finds it-

self in, or can they be seen as victims of history, whether it be that of their own, of the “wretched island”, or of both? McCabe leaves these questions open to the consideration of his readers. We might be inclined to condemn Tom and Mary in equal measure, for instance, yet by revealing Roisin’s and Mary’s negative attitudes to mother and husband respectively, McCabe alerts us to the danger of failing to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes.

Even if Roisin often feels sorry for her father as she witnesses the abuse he is subject to, there is nevertheless a limit to her patience with him. This becomes evident in the tragicomic episode of the Viceroy’s trousers when Tom is called upon to sew up a pair of “shootin’ britches” for Lord Clarendon, who is visiting Eden Hall. As Roisin recounts her father’s story of what happened, we learn that he bungled this job, too:

When he brought the britches to Eden Hall they were all at dinner, full of wine and good humour. The Viceroy went into another room and came back in wearin’ the britches. No one said a thing at first. Then Lord Clonroy said,

– I’ll tell you what you’ve done, Brady. You’ve made a bags of the Viceroy’s britches!

They all thought that was so funny they near laughed themselves sick except the Viceroy. (13-14)

Grace commiserates with her father because he has been “shamed”, but Roisin detects a “self sorry whinge” in his account of the episode that inspires anger rather than compassion. “I was filled with so much anger”, she confesses, “[that] I wanted to hit him and walk out of the house” (14). Adding to her anger is the fact that Tom has squandered part of the “golden guinea” that Lord Clarendon has given him in spite of the fiasco of the britches. “He had sixteen shillings and a few pence left, enough to feed us all for a month”, Roisin notes. But “[h]e had drunk near a week’s food, and though we loved him we all felt angry and ashamed about this” (15). Mary bawls him out for a fool, and as far as Roisin is concerned, this is what finally drives him away for good:

Dada left that night after she shouted fool at him so wicked vicious, and hardly a day passes or a night but I think of him. How or where did he die? Who buried him? Where? Ditch, bog or mountain place? Did he throw himself in a deep river or the sea like so many? If that’s what fell out I’ll have to think of him as gone to God’s light or the Devil’s dark or is he maybe alive somewhere up about Dundalk or Dublin? They say the hunger’s as bad in the towns as the country and anyway who’d employ a poor tailor only the poor and the poor have nothin’. He’s dead I think with a million others. (16-17)

By having Roisin express her anxiety over the unknown fate of a missing family member, McCabe brings out an aspect of the Famine experience that is seldom, if ever, referred to in histories of the period.

If Mary Brady, perhaps with good reason, is hard on her husband, she is no less so on her daughters. As Roisin sees it, her mother's strictness is due to her fear of shame and to her consequent preoccupation with what people will think of her family:

The mother was all outshow and pride. What would the priest and the neighbours think of her two daughters were near hoors out dancin' and gallivantin' like mad heifers in heat and half the parish half dead from hunger? It was nothin' to her we were young and wanted our bit of life away from misery[.] ... No matter what any of us done we were shammin' her before the whole country! (11-12)

Roisin has no sympathy for this obsession, especially in view of the present state of the country:

No one told her 'the whole country' doesn't know or care if you're alive or dead; no one in the country gives an ass's fart for anyone only themselves, and any halfwit could tell you that, and the same halfwit could tell you there's not a family in all Ireland hasn't some shame to hang its head about. (12)

For Mary, however, an impeccable reputation is essential, even if it is a matter of merely keeping up appearances. So when she finds out that Grace's "gallivantin'" has resulted in pregnancy, the fear of shame weighs a lot more than any consideration for her daughter's welfare. Consequently, after "a screechin' match to end all screechin' matches", Mary chains the offending girl to the roof beam in the cockloft and leaves her up there "with a bowl and a bucket" to await her confinement (19). While there is nothing Roisin can do to prevent this cruel, virtually inhuman treatment of her sister, she tries to comfort Grace by conjuring up the picture of a better life:

I kept sayin' how I loved her and how she'd be alright and how her babby would be alright and maybe someway I'd get the money and we'd have a new life in America[.] ... In America there would be no Kings or Queens, no agents or landlords, no bailiffs or house tumblers. We'd be welcomed by our own people into a new world. There would be food and clothes, singin' and dancin', proper work and proper wages in a country where we'd be all free at last. (24-25)

To herself, however, Roisin admits that all this is an illusion: "I knew in my heart of hearts that none of this was true, not lies, but not true." As a victim of famine, she is much more sceptical about America than her real-life counterparts were.

For numerous destitute and starving Irish, America held out the prospect of a new life away from oppression, poverty and hunger. As Oliver MacDonagh has observed, “there was ... a general, if naive, belief amongst them that it was ‘the home of liberty’, a country in which a degraded people might regain its dignity.”³⁸ But many of those who eventually reached the United States found a rather different reality. According to James Donnelly, in the bigger cities they “encountered not only squalid living and working conditions but deep and venomous American nativist hostility”, and Cecil Woodham-Smith noted that “[v]ery few of the poor Irish who fled from Ireland in the famine emigration were destined to achieve prosperity and success themselves.”³⁹ The American traveller William Balch found that many aspiring emigrants he spoke with were deluded by “the fancied prospect before them, of comfort and competence”, and he regretted having to “break the illusion, and dispel the charm, by a sober description of the reality.”⁴⁰

For the Brady sisters, the American dream fades into another nightmare as Grace bleeds to death after delivering a child that did not survive. If we can believe Roisin, who says she was kept out of the house during Grace’s labour, the baby was alive: “I heard its wee cry”, she claims (26). Yet Mary’s version of what happened contradicts this: “The babby, she said, was dead born. It made no shape to breathe at all, only a wee gurgle.” Disbelieving her mother’s story, Roisin seeks and finds the baby “with a terrible red ring on its neck”, buried under a flagstone in the byre. Given her negative attitude to Mary and her grief for Grace, it is hardly surprising that Roisin should see the bruise as proof that her mother has strangled the baby. Whatever affection or regard she may have had for Mary in the past seems to be totally wiped out by the conviction that she is guilty of infanticide:

It was rage then I felt for this woman would sicken you with her moanin’ and her prayers and her rosaries, her saints, pishogues [charms] and fairies. She had murdered her own flesh and blood. (27)

Roisin refuses even to consider the notion of her mother’s innocence, taking Mary’s subsequent silence on the matter as proof of her guilt: “She knew I knew but not a word was said” (29). Moreover, she is convinced that all the neighbours, too, have at least an inkling of what has transpired, in spite of Mary’s “performance” at the funeral: “It fair sickened me watchin’ the Mother after

³⁸ MacDonagh, “Irish Emigration to the United States of America and the British Colonies during the Famine”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 380.

³⁹ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 33; Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, p. 207.

⁴⁰ Balch, *Ireland As I Saw It*, pp. 137, 363.

the keenin' was over and the grave filled bendin' her head to neighbours, all of them lettin' on to know nothin' and knowin' or guessin' everythin'" (29-30). Grace's death – or perhaps a combination of that and a guilty conscience, Roisin's accusation, Tom's desertion, and the prolonged strain of poverty and famine – marks the beginning of Mary's descent into madness. From the day of the funeral onwards, Roisin tells us, her mother

was never in her right mind. If she heard a squeal of an owl or rabbit, the shriek of a swallow, or a hound growlin' at night, she'd think it was the babby she heard and start to cry and wander the country prayin' and ravin' about two angels were lost and how she'd earn hell if they weren't found. It was the warden, Mervyn Johnston, found her in the bog of Scart, her whole body scabbed by thorns and briars. (30)

Confined in the idiot ward of the poorhouse, Mary faces her own nightmare, "[c]hained in with barrels of piss and shit and a go of cracked Bridies ... [in] a shambles shed of howls ... a screamin' hell "(106). In that hell, her only wish is for Roisin to believe her story of that night "in a blind of terror",

when the babby was caught at the shoulders for hours and dead for hours, and I callin' every minute on God above to help me before I dragged it from her body by its neck and then the great bloodfall and me on my knees watchin' the life go out of my own poor cratur, dyin', dyin' like a candle, before my eyes. (123)

If Mary is to be believed, her attempts to tell this story have been thwarted by Roisin's refusal to listen. "[W]hen I shaped to tell her different times", Mary complains, "she screamed back at me, her two fingers in her two ears. I quit tryin'. I wasn't goin' to beg a hearin' from my own blood" (120).

With two unreliable narrators giving their conflicting versions of the same event, it is difficult to determine exactly who is telling the truth. It is not inconceivable that Mary killed the baby, and as we learn from Lord Clonroy's story, rumour has it that she did: "Murdered her granddaughter, they say" (98). As noted in Chapter Two, infanticide did occur during the Famine, and according to Carolyn Conley, "[g]randparents were sometimes particularly eager to rid the family of its shame."⁴¹ By implying that Mary might be guilty of the crime, McCabe, like O'Flaherty, points up a gruesome aspect of the period that has been largely overlooked by historians of the Famine. At the same time, he exposes a society constrained by norms of moral conduct in which the fear of sin and shame infects personal relations and impairs people's capacity for empathy.

⁴¹ Carolyn Conley, *Melancholy Accidents: The Meaning of Violence in Post-Famine Ireland* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), p. 116.

While Roisin is unable, or unwilling, to see things from her mother's point of view, Grace is more understanding:

– She loves us, Roisin.

I pointed at the chain and asked,

– Is that love?

– She's sick with worry over the head of everythin'.

– She's mad with pride, or just plain mad.

Again Grace looked away for a while and then said,

– It was me that sinned, Rosh. Me, not her.

I made no answer to that silliness. The mother was either mouthin' prayers or usin' a tongue would cut you in two. I knew Grace half believed what she preached, that Holy God had sent down the blight and the hard hunger to punish us for all our sins of impurity. (25)

As noted earlier, the records of the Irish Folklore Commission indicate that many people did believe that the Famine was a punishment from God, but they understood it in terms of a penalty for their wastefulness in previous years. Mary's construal of the potato blight as God's vengeance for sins of impurity is an ultimately futile attempt to restrain the supposedly immoral conduct of her daughters. Furthermore, it signals a skewed, although widespread religiosity deriving from the notion of God as punitive rather than merciful.

The mother's own story reveals that Roisin's description of her as a proud, bad-tempered, sanctimonious person who constantly bullies and disparages her husband and harangues her daughters about their "gallivanting" is not overstated. Out of pride, Mary refuses Mervyn Johnston's offer to help out by arranging for one of the girls to be employed at Eden Hall. "I'd as lief we'd all starve", she tells them, "as see aither of you plump at Drumbofin! Scullions to Bob Skinner, Lord Clonroy, is it" (122)? She refers to her husband as "a sham article couldn't sew a shroud on a ghost" (108), and this is by no means his only shortcoming:

Useless wee shagger, a mickey on him like a thimble and, worse again, a thirst on him for whiskey like an empty still! And the more I'd tongued 'bout how useless he was the more I'd hear the girls whisper,

– Poor Dada. Poor Dada.

And I'd say each time,

–Small loss he’s gone, girls, small loss. (115)

The “capers” of her daughters, “the silly wee ditch hoors”(108), are an endless source for her sermonizing about the wages of sin:

I warned them day in day out, so I did. God knows I did. Any night they’d creep in late from wake or dance I’d shout at them:

– Is it a pair of hoors I have for daughters? Go out wash yerselves, ye dirty clarts, ye have me shamed before the whole country. Have ye naither a titter of wit nor a track of dacency?

Wore out I was tellin’ them how your sins wing back to find you out [...] ... They paid no heed. No heed. No heed. (107)

Mary’s efforts to restrain the perceived immoral behaviour of her daughters are not confined to such strident lectures. On a daily basis, she subjects them to what Eóin Flannery has described as “a symbolic and penitent cleansing rite” which is “socially and morally sanctioned as part of the policing of these female bodies.”⁴² Thus in spite of poverty and hunger, Mary enforces the “washin’ torture”, as Grace calls it. “No matter how hungry we were”, Roisin says,

she’d always have bought soap in the house or if there was no money she’d make it herself.

– Water costs nothin’, she’d say, and by God you girls’ll keep your bodies clean and your souls pure as long as you’re in my care.

She smelled of carbolic herself and made sure we did too. (15-16)

Roisin recognizes the punitive element in the washing procedure, but Grace cannot understand why their mother puts them through it. To Roisin, the reason is obvious: “[W]e smell young and natural. She hates that.” And she is certain that Mary would resort to more drastic measures if she could: “Snig off our rosebuds if she had her way and tell us the Devil put them in there to make us sin” (16). As strategies for controlling her daughters, Mary’s ceaseless scolding, her warnings about sinful behaviour, and her insistence of cleanliness and purity have the opposite effect. “[W]e kept away from the house every chance we got”, Roisin tells us, “[a]nd why not! Weren’t we young girls out for a bit of life and who could blame us with death every other day in every other townland” (17)? Here, the sisters’ romantic escapades are represented as life-affirming rather than reprehensible, and as necessary, albeit fleeting respites from the

⁴² Eóin Flannery, “‘The Hard Hunger’: Famine, Sexuality and Form in Eugene McCabe’s *Tales from the Poorhouse*”, *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2010), pp. 49-68 [59].

terrible reality of famine and death. By contrast, Mary sees nothing but sin in their “capers”, and the fact that they are indulged in when famine is rampant is, from a moral perspective, even more reprehensible. As atonement for these and numerous other unspecified sins, she enforces a regime of regular prayer:

-Three Hail Marys, she'd say, for this, that and the other, every other half hour of the night or day and we'd have to answer,

-Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Night and day it's sinners and death. Death the last word in that prayer[.] ... Ten deaths with every decade. (25-26)

To Roisin, this harping on about sin and death is obviously intolerable, and as she sees it, the endless litany of prayers is proved futile by Mary's ultimate fate: “Where did all those Hail Marys lead to in the end but down the darkest road of all” (31)?

Ignorant of her mother's background, and thus unaware of how it may have shaped her character, Roisin sees only a woman whose religious zealotry and preoccupation with “outshow”, sin and shame have damaged family relations. Mary's own story explains, at least to some extent, why she has become the person she is. She grew up in a large family with six siblings, a domineering, punitive father, and a sickly mother “stooped all her days over pots till she tumbled into her grave at fifty like most poor weemen in the world.” Her father, John Daly, referred to by neighbours as “Holy John” because of his reputation as a faith healer and a half-priest, was “fierce holy ... and strict.” His authoritarianism, reinforced by a puritanical religiosity, apparently involved a fair amount of domestic violence aimed at the children. According to Mary, he would threaten to “redde[n] [their] arses” for a mere “fit of the giggles ... at the Rosary,” and they knew that he was “[n]o man for empty threats.” This suggests that they were no strangers to corporal punishment, yet her brother Festus would not always take the abuse lying down: “Blessèd John Bollox of Drumlanna! That's what Festus called him, the only one of the boys ever to face up to him and hit back” (109). In the Daly family, the subject of sex was taboo, but, intrigued by the “mystery” of John's reputed ability to make barren women conceive by putting his hands on their heads and praying to the Virgin Mother, the children wondered how *they* were conceived, with their mother “below in the settle bed, and Dada above in the cockloft.” To Festus, contemptuous of his father's self-assumed “holiness”, the answer came readily: “Hands on from Holy John. Or maybe seven more Immaculate Conceptions.” Mary's description of the punishment inflicted on

Festus when their father heard this sarcastic remark repeated by one of the girls reveals John's propensity for excessive violence:

Dada cut an ashplant and lashed Festus till he wasn't fit to scream and locked him in the byre for a week on cold stirabout and water. He come out like a ghost. After that he held his tongue. Couldn't get away from Drumlanna quick enough. (111)

This pattern of domestic violence, especially in its psychological manifestation, is repeated in the Brady family, except that there, the mother is the perpetrator. Mary's obsession with sin and shame is in part a legacy of the religiosity enforced by her father that informed her life well into adulthood. "I always done what he said", she avers, "I prayed" (112). Another part of it stems from the burden of her own perceived sins. "I chained up [Grace's] shame", she explains, "'cause I'm cangled to shame myself" (120). One source of this shame is her repressed memory of probable incest, another is the unconfessed adultery with a knifegrinder, a total stranger, the real father of Roisin and Grace. In Mary's description of her infidelity, her guilt at having sinned is juxtaposed with the recollection of rapture and abandon:

May God forgive the night I had in the feathers with the knifegrinder. I lost track of who he was and who I was in a fog so blind I didn't give a donkey's howl if they heard me ten townlands away[.] ... Two lives he planted. Never asked him his name. Wild carry on. (114)

Sexually frustrated in her marriage to Tom Brady, the "useless wee shagger", it is hardly surprising that she exults in the gratification she experiences with the stranger. Yet she associates her uninhibited carnal pleasure with a reprehensible promiscuity that, if revealed, would be condemned by Church and society alike. Consequently, she attributes her behaviour to the influence of evil forces: "The Devil was in me that night. He knows his business." This attempt at denying her own sexuality, together with her feelings of guilt and shame, have significant bearings on her relationship with and attitude to her daughters. Haunted by the conviction that they were "got in sin" (108) and by her guilt at not having confessed how they were conceived "to a single soul" (115), she turns into the over-protective, often punitive mother who does her best (or worst) to suppress the emerging sexuality of Roisin and Grace.

In her discussion of contemporary Irish incest narratives, Christine St Peter observes that some novels "introduce the subject almost tangentially":

In these we discover so fleeting a mention of incest, "half buried in the language", that the reader might well dismiss its importance – as the characters

seem to – were it not for a sense of indeterminate intergenerational damage that leaches down from parent to children, tainting affective and familial relationships[.] ... One effect of such a strategy is to reveal how commonplace the phenomenon might be, how it provides just one of many significant influences in the experiences of an individual and family.⁴³

McCabe's treatment of the subject in *Tales from the Poorhouse* accords with these remarks. Cissie, Mary's sister, and her four girls "were all in livin' terror of Noel", Cissie's child- and wife-battering husband. According to Mary, "there was always one of her girls bruised or worse, and that was only the half of it 'cause *there was other carry on couldn't be spoke of*" (117; emphasis added). Although the word "incest" is never used, Mary's own history obliquely suggests that she has been sexually abused by her father while living alone with him prior to her marriage when, according to Roisin, she "was long past thirty" (12). Even if John and Mary both may be aware of self-delusion, they circumvent the subject by referring to it in terms of "bad" dreams instigated by the Devil. Mary recalls an occasion when her father, with tears in his eyes, confessed to his head being "full of nothin' but bad notions" and she asked how "a Christian man as good livin' could be so troubled." "The Devil at night", was the answer, "[h]e poisons the head." Assuming that John was referring to "unchaste" dreams, Mary questioned the notion that such dreams were equivalent to sin: "Sure the Pope himself has nature like us. He must dream like us, surely to God." Her father conceded that this was true enough, but added that "betimes you'd be hard put to know when you're awake and when you're asleep" (118). This remark conjures up a distressing memory for Mary, a memory that she has suppressed up until then and, very likely, from then on until it resurfaces in her present narrative:

That was when I minded a dream that wouldn't leave me be, no matter how I prayed and who I prayed to. I tried the Virgin herself, then Brigid, then Monica, and none of them was fir to banish the dream. When I was asleep, down he'd come from the cockloft into the settle bed and I'd take his piesel in my two hands and when I put it inside me it took the breath from me and when we were done he'd crawl out to the street and howl up at the stars like a dog, beggin' God Almighty to forgive him. Then I'd wake in a wet fright to hear him snorin' above and thank God it was a dream only. Even so, I wouldn't be myself all next day. (118-19)

These nocturnal visitations could of course be understood simply as the erotic dreams of two sexually unfulfilled individuals (John is a widower, Mary

⁴³ Christine St Peter, "Petrifying Time: Incest Narratives from Contemporary Ireland", in Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds), *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 125-44 [128-29].

a virgin), but John's comment about the difficulty of knowing whether one is awake or asleep suggests otherwise. Furthermore, although Mary argues that there is no sin in dreams, she apparently feels that she has sinned in a concrete way since she makes an attempt to confess to Holy John, the half-priest, but is unable to go through with it: "Bless me, Dada, for I have sinned. My soul's cangled to the Devil on account of -." Attempting to discover a rational explanation for the dreams, Mary, like her father, attributes them to the work of that "crafty villain", the Devil: [M]aybe in black dark he planted the same [dream] in Dada's head. Who can say? It could never be talked about" (119). Janet Liebman Jacobs has observed that "the secrecy surrounding sexual abuse contributes to the shame that the daughter experiences."⁴⁴ Even if Mary is aware at some level that what she experienced was the real thing and not "a dream only", she never entertains the notion of confessing to an ordained priest. Given "the cultural denial of incest and the attendant idealization of the father in patriarchal society",⁴⁵ such a confession was likely to meet with outright dismissal and a condemnation of the confessor/victim rather than of the perpetrator. In her memory, the ugly picture of an abusive father is supplanted by the recollection of domestic bliss: "Them were happy times, happy, happy times. Just the two of us and not a cross word nor a dumb patch between us, ever" (112). Yet the subject that "could never be talked about" was precisely such a "dumb spot." In Mary's case, then, the unmentionable becomes a repressed memory involving immorality which feeds and exacerbates her fear of shame. The famine, and specifically the thought of her daughters' "gallivanting" while people are dying all around, bring this memory as well as the one of her illicit affair with the knife grinder to the surface, and her increasingly neurotic fear of shame manifests itself in the unremitting harassment of her daughters, culminating in the cruel treatment of Grace and implied infanticide.

In Julian Barnes's novel *The Sense of an Ending*, the narrator muses on the concept of damage. He believes that

we all suffer damage, one way or another. How could we not, except in a world of perfect parents, siblings, neighbours, companions? And then there is the question, on which so much depends, of how we react to the damage: whether we admit or repress it, and how this affects our dealings with others[.] ... [T]here are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And these are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Janet Liebman Jacobs, *Victimized Daughters* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 44.

These remarks illuminate what we know of, or may infer from, Mary's history. Although she does not admit it, she has surely been damaged by her experiences of sexual abuse (to which I think we can safely assume she has been subjected by her father) and of routine domestic violence. In order to avoid further damage in the form of the stigmatization attaching to sexual immorality, extra-marital pregnancy and bastardy, Mary turns into the ruthless mother who chains up her daughter for fear of an additional burden of shame. Unhinged by Grace's death, she still retains enough presence of mind to recognize the folly, though not the selfishness, of her deed:

I lost the head and got her by the ear and chained her above like a pedlar's monkey, well hid from the eyes of Maggie Scarlet and her like. I did. So I did[.] ... God forgive me[.] ... A mistake I made, to be sure, a mistake, and aren't we all wise after blunders, and don't we all blunder on, and swear never again, and on we go again all forgot. (107-08)

In the "foul purgatory" (107) of the poorhouse idiot ward, surrounded by diseased famine victims, human degradation and death, and tormented by feelings of guilt and remorse, Mary retreats into prayer:

God help me, God help me, God help me. Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice, because with Thee, Lord, there is mercy, with Thee there is plentiful redemption. With Thee there is forgiveness. (122)

Such recurrent prayers reflect her despair rather than any genuine trust in mercy and forgiveness – as John Banville puts it in his review of *Heaven Lies About Us*, "[i]n all the stories it is a cold heaven that watches over the action and withholds response."⁴⁷ When Roisin visits her mother in the poorhouse, she is deeply affected by Mary's apparent despair, her mental fragility, and her appalling surroundings:

I saw her there just the once. I won't ever see her again. Leastways I don't want to. I thought I hated her but when I saw her in that ward I don't know what I felt. She was still clean, on clean straw, but surrounded by filth and smell, her only company the gibberin' and laughin' of mad women night and day. Her eyes were blank but her lips were movin'. Hail Mary, Holy Mary. (30-31)

Roisin's account of the visit reveals that she is capable of pitying her mother, but the empathy that might enable forgiveness is lacking. At the end of this their final meeting, Roisin tells her: "I can't forgive you, Mother, ever, you must know

⁴⁷ John Banville, "Deliver into darkness", *The Boston Globe*, 18 April 2004, http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2004/04/18/deliver_into_darkness?mode=PF (23 January 2006).

that.” Her uncompromising attitude extinguishes whatever hope Mary has entertained of eventually vindicating herself in the eyes of her daughter:

She [Mary] looked at me [Roisin] proper then for the first time, covered her face, no sound, but I could see her body shakin’. Some mad pauper woman started in to howl like a hound. Another joined her. That’s how I left her in the hell she made for herself. That’s when I saw her last and it’s the last time I’ll ever see her or less we meet in Heaven, if God forgives her. (31)

Is Mary’s hell, then, entirely of her own making? Considering what Roisin tells us about her mother, it would be easy to answer that question in the affirmative, were it not for what Mary’s own history reveals. Permeated by experiences of trauma and loss, Mary’s harrowing story invites a measure of empathy rather than outright condemnation. McCabe does not excuse her treatment of Roisin and Grace, but his rendition of her memories, confused, fragmented and unreliable though they are, offers an explanation for it which discloses his own empathic capacity as well as his understanding of flawed human nature.

With Mary confined in the idiot ward, Roisin and Miclín, her consumptive young brother, are left “half alive and half dead in an empty house with hardly a crumb” between them (31). As if impending starvation were not bad enough, Roisin soon learns that her brother has contracted typhus and will not survive. In order to avoid contagion, the local doctor tells her, she must isolate the sick boy in the byre:

I was to lock the door tight and seal it with blue clay and give him his stirabout and water on a shovel through the small windy, then close the windy tight and keep well away from infection. (32)

The doctor has further instructions for her: when Miclín dies, she is to leave him in the byre and burn it to the ground. McCabe’s representation of the practice of isolating typhus patients and burning infected buildings with deceased victims inside highlights yet another aspect of the Famine rarely noted in general histories of the period. It is mentioned in only one of the history books examined here, Edwards and Williams’s *The Great Famine*, in which William MacArthur briefly refers to a report by a medical officer which stated that

when fever occurs in a poor family, the person affected is through fear of contagion abandoned, the door of the room or cabin is built up, and a hole made in the outward wall through which the dispensary doctor creeps to administer relief.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ William MacArthur, “Medical History of the Famine”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 306.

MacArthur also mentions the fact that the fear of infection put a stop to “the ceremonies which traditionally preceded burial”, and that “in some instances, failing any other means of disposal, the cabin was pulled down over them [the bodies] and set on fire.”⁴⁹ In his chapter on Famine folklore in the same collection, Roger McHugh notes that the people generally understood that it was necessary to isolate typhus patients. “They would be moved to barns and sheds”, he writes,

the door would be built up with turf and ... food would be passed in through the window, often on a shovel, by relatives or friends who would be careful not to handle vessels used by the infected person.⁵⁰

McHugh’s reading of the folklore material also reveals that the practice of burning infected houses “appears to have been widespread”, and that “[s]ometimes fear of infection was so great that the houses would not be entered at all, but would be fired, or their roofs and walls broken in, the bodies of fever-victims being left inside.”⁵¹ According to Thomas Keneally, in Ireland, this was “a totally unaccustomed method of disposing of the body of a beloved.”⁵²

These historians provide the bare facts of the matter, but they tell us nothing about what this practice meant in terms of the suffering endured by afflicted families. By contrast, McCabe’s fiction conveys a sense of what it might have been like for surviving members of a family to lose one of their own in this manner. There is no mistaking Roisin’s agony when, following the doctor’s instructions, she carries Miclín into the byre: “He pleaded with me to get back into the cabin. I was sick with grief and pity but what could I do” (32)? The question “what could I do?” reveals that, aside from grief and pity, she is also beset by feelings of guilt for abandoning her brother at a time when he needs her the most. The doctor’s prediction that Miclín is “not long for this world” (31) proves accurate. The consumptive, half-starved boy does not have the strength to withstand the onslaught of typhus, nor to bear the desolation of his solitary confinement: “He never took a mouthful of stirabout or a porringer of water off the shovel, just sobbed, curled up, and stopped breathin’” (32). Following the painful experience of practically burying her brother alive, Roisin then has to endure the sight of his tomb going up in flames:

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

⁵⁰ Roger McHugh, “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition”, in *ibid.*, p. 416.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 418.

⁵² Thomas Keneally, *Three Famines: Starvation and Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 152.

Neighbours came then with sticks and creels of turf to make sure the byre was well burned. For three night and three days it burned, and I wept bitter tears because all belongin' to me were now gone. I was an orphan like thousands and thousands the country over. (32)

Having gone through the ordeal of Miclín's illness and death, Roisin is faced with yet another nightmare. Regarding the poorhouse as her only hope, Mervyn Johnston, the warden, offers her the "red ticket", but the prospect of entering the institution fills Roisin with fear:

I looked at the red ticket in my hand with my name and number on it. At first I couldn't speak. When I was fit to I said,

- Hereabouts, Mister Johnston, people call this the death ticket. I'd rather die where I was born. (32)

Contemporaries as well as historians have commented on the reluctance of the Irish poor, even the destitute, to seek admission into the workhouse. Many saw it as the very last resort and others, already resigned to death, entered only in the hope of a decent burial – a hope that often proved vain since many houses were unable to cope with the ever-increasing number of deaths. According to T.P. O'Neill, "[t]he prison-like discipline and the treatment of the poor gave the workhouse system an unpopular character", and James Donnelly notes that "the poor loathed the harsh discipline ... and dreaded contacting a fatal disease there."⁵³ Following a visit to the Kilrush Union in 1849, George Poulett Scrope wrote:

There appeared to be a great indisposition to enter the workhouse, under the impression it was death to do so. This is caused to a great degree by the numerous deaths that have occurred in the house ... owing to ... the fact that the poor wretches, postponing their entrance there to the last, carry the seeds of mortality in their constitutions with them. They go in only to die. ⁵⁴

Seeing that Roisin will not easily be persuaded to go into the workhouse, Johnston informs her that there is talk of impending evictions and that the Brady's home is on the list of houses to be demolished. On hearing this, Roisin's "heart and insides were suddenly tumblin' in terror" as she remembers the recent eviction of her aunt Cissie and her girls. Her description of the "tumbling" mirrors those of numerous contemporaries who witnessed the dreadful scenes of families being driven out of their homes, their belongings thrown out into the road, and their cabins made uninhabitable:

⁵³ O'Neill, "The Organisation and Administration of Relief", in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 250; Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 106.

⁵⁴ G. P. Scrope, *Some Notes of a Tour in England, Scotland, and Ireland*, p. 30.

I'd seen the Callaghans, my cousins, evicted in the month of Christmas last year, five of them, the door smashed down, and what choice had they then but the workhouse or the killin' winter? They were carted off to the poorhouse, three of them now dead. I'd seen the tumblers at work[.] ... One jumps up and saws the roofbeam, the others throw up grapple hooks, and the roof is down in minutes. We saw the constabulary sittin' on horseback watchin' with muskets and truncheons. Terror, fright and howlin' to break the hardest heart. (33)

Fearing that, if evicted, she will meet with the same fate as her cousins, Roisin again declines Johnston's offer of the red ticket, telling him that she would "rather take to the fields and roads than go to the poorhouse." But when the poorhouse master himself arrives to persuade her to take the ticket, she relents – not merely because of his promises of "middlin' sleepin' quarters", kitchen work and perhaps "some paid work" (34), but because she has heard that "[i]f he takes a notion of some girl or woman he'll buy her passage [to America] if she opens her legs for him" (33-34). Noticing his stare, she realizes that he has already taken "a notion" of her and that by bestowing sexual favours on him, she might eventually escape from famine and poverty. "I'll fight", she vows in the poorhouse:

I'll do anythin' to stay alive and, with luck, I'll get my hands on five golden guineas and get away to America, because no place in the world could be worse than this except hell itself, and no girl ever had to be shamed like me. But then look how fear of shame tumbled the Mother into hell, and anyway I knew well what to expect when I said,

- I'll take the red ticket. (34)

So even though Roisin is sceptical about the prevailing notion of America as the promised land, she grasps the chance of trading her hell on earth – the poorhouse – for a possible, if uncertain future in a foreign country, and her determination to survive is stronger than any misgivings she has about in effect becoming a prostitute.

As Margaret Kelleher has pointed out, women's prostitution is "an adaptive strategy rarely discussed in famine writings and scarcely represented in Irish famine literature."⁵⁵ In general histories of the Famine, the issue of prostitution as a means of survival is indeed practically ignored. Canon O'Rourke recounts the story of a Roscommon couple and their "young and

⁵⁵ Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 145. In her analyses of a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish famine texts, Kelleher finds that this "adaptive strategy" is represented only in one play, Gerard Healy's *The Black Stranger* from 1945.

comely" daughter, all on the verge of starvation, who were offered relief by "a wealthy person." The offer was refused because it was "accompanied by a dishonourable condition", the girl declaring that "much as I love my father and mother ... I will suffer them as well as myself to die rather than get them relief at the price of my virtue."⁵⁶ Since O'Rourke makes no further mention of prostitution, he gives the impression that girls and women did not barter their bodies for food. The matter is not discussed by Mitchel, nor by Woodham-Smith, Kinealy or Donnelly and, with a reference to the *Freeman's Journal* of 19 May 1848, T.P. O'Neill merely states that "[g]irls were driven to prostitution."⁵⁷ By contrast, David Fitzpatrick treats this next-to-taboo subject in more detail. In his essay on Captain Edmond Wynne, who served as temporary Poor Law inspector in parts of counties Leitrim and Roscommon between 1847 and 1849, he discusses the claims by local observers that Wynne, a married man, provided at least three pauper women with relief or passage money in exchange for sexual favours. Complaints about Wynne's improper and immoral conduct precipitated a series of Select Committee hearings, but the House of Lords found that the allegations were not borne out by the evidence.⁵⁸ Fitzpatrick argues that, among other things, Wynne's case "illustrates the effect of the Famine in creating new forms of barter" while also illuminating

the social and sexual assumptions of 'an officer and a gentleman' plunged into the famine inferno[.] ... If indeed he had connection with the female paupers of Carrick, he was asserting not merely his sexual freedom but his social freedom to consort in public as he pleased.⁵⁹

In *Tales from the Poorhouse*, McCabe fictionalizes one episode involving the alleged offender who appears in Murphy's story as a workhouse master named John Wynne. Murphy recalls that Wynne "was very much in the news at the time" because

some peeping squint of a squireen had seen him 'at it' in a ditch with a pauper girl and written to Dublin Castle about the shock this vision had caused to what he called his 'moral sensibility'. All hell then broke over Wynne's head. He was the Devil incarnate using his position to seduce poor dying pauper girls. (61)

⁵⁶ O'Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, p. 186.

⁵⁷ O'Neill, "The Organization and Administration of Relief", p. 252.

⁵⁸ See Fitzpatrick, "Famine, Entitlements and Seduction: Captain Edmond Wynne in Ireland, 1846-1851", pp. 610-18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 615, 616.

The particulars of this incident and its aftermath are described by David Thomson in his memoir *Woodbrook*, which McCabe lists as one of his sources.⁶⁰ It was the adolescent son of the magistrate Thomas Kirkwood who claimed that he had “heard some groaning” and seen Captain Wynne “in connection with [a] woman” in a plantation of fir-trees on his father’s estate. This resulted in an angry letter from Kirkwood to the Poor Law Commissioners, complaining that the Carrick-on-Shannon workhouse had been “turned into a den of infamy” by Wynne in particular, “and not content with that, he brings these bad characters to my gate ... which I have positive proof of.”⁶¹ Thomson notes that but for this letter, Wynne’s alleged sexual transgressions would have remained a subject of local gossip instead of generating a Select Committee inquiry. In the course of the investigation, members of the Board of Guardians produced

witnesses who said they had seen him ‘in connexion’ with half a dozen women in the [work]house or near it[.] ... Day after day girls were spoken of to the committee – a new name every few days – with much circumstantial and some actual evidence of Wynne’s misconduct with each.⁶²

These rather suspect witnesses were nevertheless unable to prove that Wynne “gave female paupers privileges in return for sexual intercourse.”⁶³ The analogy between the slightly disguised historical Wynne and Murphy interweaves history and fiction to suggest that this form of barter did exist and that men who indulged in it did not consider their behaviour morally reprehensible. So although Murphy implies that John Wynne actually *was* “at it” with one, and probably several pauper girls, he sees no reason to blame, let alone demonize the man: “The poor girls were dying to seduce him for anything going, extra food rations, passage money, or shenanigans for the sake of shenanigans. I know”(61-62).

Murphy’s liaisons with pauper girls are never subjected to official scrutiny, but they are known and gossiped about locally. According to Roisin, “[t]hey all say hereabouts he’s a bad lad” (33), and in the idiot ward Mary has to put up with snide remarks from a “cross-eyed auld sow” about Roisin and the poorhouse master: “That Murphy fella has your other daughter bow-legged, Brady. Take care she doesn’t end up potbellied like the others!” (110). Murphy’s own story reveals that this kind of talk is by no means groundless. In his confession to his dead

⁶⁰ McCabe, *Tales from the Poorhouse*, p. 126.

⁶¹ Thomson, *Woodbrook*, pp. 157-71 [167, 158]. See also Fitzpatrick, “Famine, Entitlements and Seduction”, pp. 614-15.

⁶² Thomson, *Woodbrook*, p. 169.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

sister, he refers to a girl he “shipped off” who “swore she was carrying” to him. Yet he disowns any personal responsibility by implying that he was deceived by the girl: “How can a man be sure? Life is hard on females when they are trapped that way unless, of course, they set the trap themselves and pay the price of such deception” (38). As he sees it, then, a girl has only herself to blame if she gets pregnant. His account of his relationship with Roisin is based on a similar, arguably twisted logic that discloses both his need for self-justification and his effort to prove – not least to himself – that he is not using his position to take advantage of pauper girls. “She was here two full weeks before I touched her”, he writes:

When I did, she looked at me for what seemed like a minute or longer, until I was obliged to ask,

- Do you object?

- How can I?

- By saying no!

To this she made no answer but continued staring in silence which I read as consent. (41)

Murphy’s question is obviously superfluous. If Roisin objected aloud, she would be left with the slim chance of surviving on inadequate food rations in the typhus-infested pauper’s ward. What Murphy reads as consent is in fact Roisin’s resignation to her lot. She has no choice but to compromise because saying no would spell starvation, and Murphy of course knows this: “Clean well-water, the leftovers of fresh bread, the cuttings of cheese and scraps of meat she gets from my table. That’s what she wants; that’s what brings her to this bed” (40). By emphasizing Roisin’s cravings rather than his own, he evades an aspect of the situation that would reflect badly on him, namely that holding out the prospect of food to a starving pauper girl surely is a form of seduction.

But Murphy insists that his conscience is clear:

I’ve no guilt about what happens in this bed, or this room, because the more I see of death every day the more I crave congress every night. Most likely she hates me for having to come here at all, and there’s something in me that dislikes her coming. (44)

Roisin pays dearly for clean water and scraps of food, while the gratification of his sexual urges costs Murphy nothing except a vague sensation of distaste, which suggests that his conscience is somewhat troubled after all. Yet he will not indulge Roisin’s dream of escape:

[S]he manages most times to slip in an enquiry about passage money, knowing well I can arrange it with Clonroy. I explain each time. A 'free' five pounds steerage ticket to America could be a death warrant. Cramped, stifling, shit-filthy conditions, and wretched food would sicken a dog. She doesn't believe or only half believes me. (44)

With the allusion to the dangers of the Atlantic crossing, Murphy conjures up the horrors of the "coffin ships" that numerous emigrants experienced, particularly in 1847. The attempt at intimidation nevertheless fails since Roisin apparently recognizes the scare tactic for what it is. Even if Murphy is willing to feed her in return for "congress", he has no intention of helping her to get away. This becomes quite obvious when Roisin, in a desperate attempt to realize her dream, suggests that he could lend her the money to "go cabin" and she would pay him back once she has found work in America:

- You want me to loan you forty pounds?

She stared at me and made no answer, so I said,

- A girl like you? Alone? In New York? Boston? Put it out of your head.

- Why?

- The dock rats'd get you for a brothel.

- I'm a hoor you think, Sir?

- They'd make you one.

- Have you not done that, Sir?

- Your choice, girl, and mind your tongue!

Next day I didn't go to the foodpress when she was drinking water. The day after that she was a tack more mannerly, like a dog that sees you reaching for the cane; biddable, but not cowering. (44-45)

Here again, Murphy refuses to acknowledge his part in the equation – by her own choice, Roisin has made herself "a hoor." And the fact that he withholds food as a punishment for her perceived impertinence gives the lie to his protestation that he has "no wish to own or dominate" (45). In Murphy's view, the American dream is a fantasy, a futile attempt to sustain hope in the harsh reality of the present:

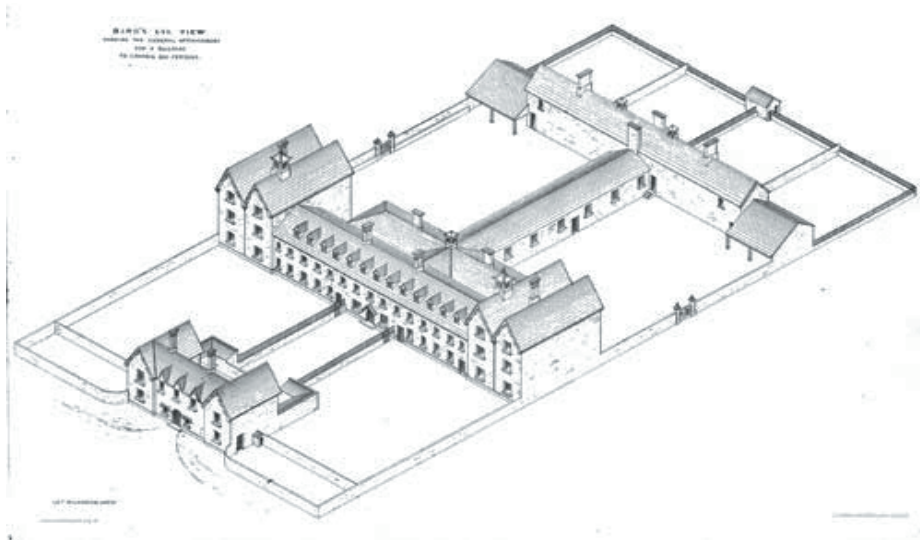
Of course, the dream they all dream is America, America, America. Paradise! Happiness! Freedom! Abundance! Meantime, the nightmare is here and now and being awake to the other bodies lodged in this house, half alive and otherwise. (45)

6.2. 'The fortress of Giant Despair'

With the Poor Law Act of 1838, the workhouse system was introduced in Ireland. The country was divided into 130 Poor Law unions, each of which was to contain a workhouse administered by an elected Board of Guardians. The planning and construction of the new buildings to accommodate between 400 and 1000 persons was entrusted to the architect George Wilkinson, who had designed a number of English workhouses. The Poor Law Commissioners stated that

[t]he style of building is intended to be of the cheapest description compatible with durability; and effect is aimed at by harmony of proportion and simplicity of arrangement, all mere decoration being studiously excluded.⁶⁴

In spite of the caveat regarding decoration, Wilkinson included Tudor-style gabled roofs, elevated chimney-shafts and mullioned windows with diamond-shaped lights in his plan. These embellishments, he felt, would give the buildings "a pleasing and picturesque appearance." Because of the "necessarily conspicuous situation which many of the buildings must occupy", he believed that the style of design he was proposing would be "the least obtrusive."⁶⁵



Bird's-eye view of Wilkinson's standard plan for Irish workhouses (Source: Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1839, Appendix B, no. 10 C)

⁶⁴ Poor Law Commissioners, *Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1839), p. 59.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Wilkinson's constructions nevertheless polarized contemporary opinion. S.G. Osborne considered the "Leviathan workhouses" to be "in general well built; of handsome outward appearance, and contrived with a good deal of care to meet the end for which they were created."⁶⁶ Asenath Nicholson described them as buildings "of vast dimensions, tasteful in architecture, surrounded with walls, like the castle or mansion of some lord", and Randall McCollum pronounced them "modern castles."⁶⁷ By contrast, Samuel Ferguson's assessment was unservedly negative. "These edifices", he wrote,

are of a uniform plan and appearance – an arrangement, no doubt, conducive to economy of design, as well as simplicity of management. But it would have been equally economic to have had a uniformity of just and pleasing proportions, so that these buildings might have constituted agreeable objects on the landscape, instead of forming, as they do now, a series of constantly recurring rural eye-sores. They are uniformly deficient in the prime requisites of light and air ..., their whole aspect affectedly gloomy, narrow, and repulsive.⁶⁸

If Ferguson found the architecture of the workhouses repulsive, John Mitchel was disgusted not only by their outward appearance, but also by what they stood for. In Glenties, County Donegal, he came upon

a certain new building – the grandest by far that those Rosses people ever saw – rearing its accursed gables and pinnacles of Tudor barbarism, and staring boldly with its detestable mullioned windows, as if to mock those wretches who still cling to liberty and mud cabins – seeming to them, in their perennial half-starvation, like a Temple erected to the Fates, or like the fortress of Giant Despair, whereinto he draws them one by one, and devours them there: – the Poor-house.⁶⁹

By likening the poorhouse to Bunyan's Doubting Castle, where Christians were imprisoned and murdered, Mitchel emphasized what he saw as the destruction wrought by the Poor Law and its attendant workhouse system. Even if people were not literally killed in these institutions, they were demoralized and degraded: "a man went in, a pauper came out."⁷⁰ In this sense, they were devoured by Giant Despair, a metaphor for "the English

⁶⁶ Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 109; McCollum, *Sketches of the Highlands of Cavan*, p. 142.

⁶⁸ Samuel Ferguson, "Architecture in Ireland", *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 29 (1847), pp. 693-708 [694].

⁶⁹ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 116.

⁷⁰ Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, p. xlviii.

government that invented paupers in Ireland, when they imposed on us their Poor Law.”⁷¹

While Mitchel’s primary objective was to expose the Poor Law as yet another vehicle for government control and for the eventual subjugation of Ireland, his contemporaries were more concerned with calling attention to the increasingly appalling conditions in a number of workhouses. In December 1846, James Hack Tuke reported on the “dreadful state” of the workhouse at Glenties:

[T]he people were in fact half-starved and only half-clothed. The day before, they had but one meal of oatmeal and water; and at the time of our visit had not sufficient food in the house for the day’s supply[.] ... Some were leaving the house, preferring to die in their own hovels rather than in the poor-house. Their bedding consisted of dirty straw, in which they were laid in rows on the floor; even as many as six persons being crowded under one rug[.] ... The rooms were hardly bearable for filth. The living and dying were stretched side by side beneath the same miserable covering! ⁷²

Tuke’s companion Joseph Crosfield found the workhouse at Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim in a “deplorable condition.” Built to accommodate eight hundred, it contained 1,050 persons at the time of his visit. Of this number, he wrote,

170 are in the hospital, ill of typhus fever and dysentery, and there are no proper means of keeping the sick apart from the healthy. The deaths are at the rate of about twelve each week, while the guardians are so poor, and the union so much in debt, that they obtain their daily food on credit; the workhouse is unprovided with bedding, insomuch that in the hospital two and three poor creatures are lying in one bed, and many of them have nothing but straw, while in the poor-house at large there is nothing but straw for any of the inmates. ⁷³

Tuke and Crosfield’s reports describe conditions that were rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception in Irish workhouses. By the end of 1846, eighty houses out of 130 were full or overcrowded.⁷⁴ Several unions had already exhausted their funds and accumulated substantial debts, and their contractors refused to deliver supplies on credit. Nevertheless, petitions for Treasury loans were categorically refused. Boards of Guardians pleaded difficulties collecting

⁷¹ Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, p. 113.

⁷² *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 150.

⁷³ Joseph Crosfield, *Distress in Ireland: A letter from Joseph Crosfield, containing a narrative of the first week of William Forster’s visit to some of the distressed districts in Ireland* (London: Edward Newman, 1846), p. 4.

⁷⁴ Poor Law Commissioners, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1847), pp. 183-84.

outstanding poor rates and the impossibility of striking new rates, but they failed to move the government to loosen the purse strings. "I fear", wrote the Home Secretary to Commissioner Twisleton on 21 December,

the inevitable result would be, that the alleged difficulty or impossibility would become general if not universal, and the Boards of Guardians would at once throw upon the Government the responsibility which by law attaches to themselves. I entertain therefore the strongest objection to any grant from the Public Treasury, in aid of or as a substitute for the relief of the poor.⁷⁵

Persistent overcrowding characterized a large number of workhouses throughout the first half of 1847. Originally built to accommodate just over 93,800 persons, the Irish workhouses held 116,321 inmates at the end of February.⁷⁶ The gradual opening of auxiliary workhouses, temporary fever hospitals and other additional accommodation, and the establishment of government soup kitchens during the late spring and early summer eventually alleviated the pressure on the workhouses, but the respite was brief. After the soup kitchen scheme was discontinued in September, the number of destitute persons seeking admission rose steadily. Sanitary conditions deteriorated, and contagious diseases spread rapidly in workhouses and fever sheds that were again becoming overcrowded. In spite of renewed efforts, some Boards of Guardians were still unable to collect sufficient rates to cover expenses. Consequently, there was a lack of clothing, bedding and medicines, and the already frugal dietary tended to fall below standard. In these circumstances, some houses were forced to suspend admissions even though they were not actually full. On visiting Connaught again in the autumn, Tuke noted that "nearly all the Unions in this province are deeply in debt, and many bankrupt", and that "several of the poor-houses, with scarcely a sixth of their full number of inmates, have been closed against further admissions."⁷⁷ If the situation in Connaught was alarming, it was no less so in parts of Munster. In November, the *Cork Examiner* expressed great concern at the state of the Skibbreen Union:

The Skibbreen Workhouse, built for 800, is shut - holding 1340 paupers within its walls - and incapable of building any more. The beggary of that vast and deplorable district must look elsewhere. It will increase four-fold in

⁷⁵ *Copies or Extracts of Correspondence Relating to the State of Union Workhouses in Ireland* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1847), p. 12.

⁷⁶ O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, p. 92; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Tuke, *A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847*, p. 14.

a few months – and where shall it look? ... We pronounce again and again ... that the winter of 1847-48 will be worse than that of 1846-47.⁷⁸

This prediction came more or less true during the following months, giving the lie to Trevelyan's declaration that the Famine was "stayed" and that "the appointed time of Ireland's regeneration" had come.⁷⁹ By the end of December, the workhouses held 119,310 persons, and in 1848, the number of inmates multiplied each month, reaching a total of 185,825 at the end of the year.⁸⁰

By all accounts, Connaught and Munster suffered most in terms of destitution, disease, and mortality, but many districts in the province of Ulster were heavily afflicted, too. In February 1847, the Society of Friends received a report from the parish of Tartaraghan in County Armagh, stating that there were "no public or private works carrying on", and that

[m]any cases of deaths from actual starvation have occurred amongst the able-bodied, without reckoning the aged and infirm ... or the very many children who have died from the same cause[.]... We are, in short, rapidly approaching, and if unassisted, must arrive at a state parallel to the worst pictures that have been presented to the public from the county of Cork.⁸¹

The high level of mortality in Lurgan workhouse in the early months of 1847 prompted an investigation by Dr Smith of the Central Board of Health, who found a state of "neglect and discomfort such as I have never seen in any other charitable institution." On 3 March, *The Belfast Vindicator* reported that "nearly 400 paupers have died in the Lurgan Workhouse during the last eight weeks."⁸² County Down was considered "the most thriving and best conditioned quarter of Ireland", yet it did not escape the effects of famine. In February, an editorial in *The Banner of Ulster* averred that "[i]t would be impossible to find more distressing cases, short of the horrors of Skibbereen, in any part of Ireland than those narrated by our reporter from the eastern divisions of Down."⁸³ In Newtownards, distress prevailed "to an alarming extent", and "the soup kitchen and

⁷⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 1 November 1847.

⁷⁹ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, pp. 65, 146.

⁸⁰ Commissioners of Irish Poor Laws, *Second Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws of Relief of the Poor in Ireland* (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1849), p. 12.

⁸¹ *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee*, p. 192.

⁸² Quoted in Gerard MacAtasney, "The Famine in County Armagh", in Christine Kinealy and Trevor Parkhill (eds), *The Famine in Ulster* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1997), pp. 35-57 [47, 46].

⁸³ Quoted in Trevor McCaverty, "The Famine in County Down", in Kinealy and Parkhill (eds), *The Famine in Ulster*, pp. 99-127 [99].

the workhouse proved inadequate to prevent suffering.”⁸⁴ The workhouse in the once prosperous town of Banbridge, originally built to cater for 800 persons, held over one thousand in February, and the numbers were increasing steadily. By early 1848, the house was crammed with 1,495 inmates.⁸⁵ A letter to the Relief Commissioners, dated 26 March 1847, from the Dean of Clogher, County Tyrone, stated that “the destitution is rapidly increasing (as may be testified by Mr Lambert, the inspector), as well as these usual consequences of insufficiency of food; dysentery & fever.” The Dean also pointed out that

we have received but little from the charitable institutions established for the relief of the destitute in Ireland, in consequence of the prevalent view (which I am sorry to say is quite common as far as this locality is concerned) that the north of Ireland is comparatively free from famine and its dire effects.⁸⁶

The “dire effects” were apparent also in Belfast, particularly in 1847. “There is not any necessity that I should point out individual cases of abject want”, an observer wrote to the *Northern Whig*, “though ... I have seen many of whose extreme destitution I could not possibly have formed a true estimate had I not seen them.”⁸⁷ In County Cavan, destitution became so widespread towards the end of 1847 that the unions of Cavan and Cootehill were unable to cope with the demand for relief. The Boards of Guardians of both unions were eventually dissolved and replaced by paid Vice-Guardians appointed by the Poor Law Commissioners. In their first report of 21 December, the Cavan Vice-Guardians wrote:

We found 1245 paupers in the house; 171 cases of fever, and that 332 had died in the house within the last six months; a debt of 4000*l.* and upwards[.] ... Fever on the increase, and the ventilation and sewerage of the house in such a bad state as to tend in a great measure to the prevalence of disease.⁸⁸

In March 1848, the Vice-Guardians arriving at Cootehill found “1121 paupers in the workhouse, built only to contain 800.” As a consequence of overcrowding, “fever and other sickness were increasing to an alarming degree.” During the previous month, 74 inmates had died, and the treasurer had no funds “to meet the demands for relief of the destitute poor, daily increasing in

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 107, 109.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 123.

⁸⁶ Brian MacDonald (ed.), “The Famine Archive: Relief Commission Papers”, *Clogher Record*, vol. XVIII, no. 1 (2000), pp. 147-400 [358].

⁸⁷ Quoted in O’Rourke, *The History of the Great Irish Famine*, p. 178.

⁸⁸ *Papers Relating to Proceedings for the Relief of the Distress, and the State of the Unions and Workhouses in Ireland, Fourth Series, 1847*, p. 649.

numbers.”⁸⁹ The Enniskillen union in County Fermanagh fared no better than Cavan and Cootehill. From the beginning of 1847 through March 1848, the workhouse was consistently overcrowded, and because the union was heavily in debt, supplies of food and clothing were inadequate, as were the facilities for fever patients. After visiting the fever shed adjacent to the workhouse on 2 March 1848, Mr D’Arcy, the Poor Law inspector, wrote to the Commissioners: “No statement of mine can convey an idea of the wretched condition the inmates of this house were in; I have frequently heard the horrors of Skibbereen quoted, but they can hardly have exceeded these.”⁹⁰ Thus contemporary accounts and official records provide ample evidence that there was indeed famine in many parts of Ulster and that appalling conditions prevailed in a number of workhouses. Yet as Christine Kinealy has observed, up until the mid-1990s, the effect of the potato blight in the province was “largely ignored” by historians, and this “contributed to a widespread belief that there was no famine” in that part of the country.⁹¹

If the Famine in Ulster has been neglected in general histories of the period, it has also largely failed to capture the imagination of twentieth-century Irish novelists.⁹² *Famine* and *The Silent People* both revolve around fictional communities in the west of Ireland, and so do more recent novels like Michael Mullen’s *The Hungry Land* (1986), Seán Kenny’s *The Hungry Earth* (1995), Brendan Graham’s *The Whitest Flower* (1998) and Laurence Power’s *Black ’47* (2012). McCabe’s novelistic story sequence, then, is quite unique in that it deals specifically with the Famine in a part of Ulster. Moreover, McCabe gives readers an insight into workhouse life and some of the various problems involved in running such an institution during the Famine. Conditions in the County Fermanagh workhouse where Murphy acts as master exemplify those found in many other workhouses throughout the country in 1847-48. As Murphy notes, overcrowding is a constant problem: “I’ve a thousand in this place built for six hundred” (47). This means that, at times, the sick and starving are refused admission, with dire consequences for some. “Last night”, Murphy writes,

⁸⁹ *Papers Relating to Proceedings for the Relief of the Distress, and the State of the Unions and Workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series, 1848* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1848), p. 649.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁹¹ Christine Kinealy, “Introduction”, in Kinealy and Parkhill (eds), *The Famine in Ulster*, pp. 1-14 [1-2].

⁹² One exception is Hazel McIntyre, whose novel *Lament in the Wind* (1998) is set in County Donegal.

we had to close the gates forcibly. About two dozen were locked out. Most of them slept under the canal bridge. Earlier, from the window, I could see some stirring, others still. Dead still. They'll be carted later to the open pit behind the turf shed along with the ones found in ditches and sheughs and the poor wretches the Council fish out of the canal from time to time, all of them consigned to perpetual light or darkness with their neighbours from a hundred townlands. (46)

Those "lucky" enough to make it through the gate are subjected to a distressing admission procedure which Murphy describes in detail:

Families mostly, starving of course, must agree to sign over all rights to land and property. Before we can admit them they must prove destitution, and then walk away forever from neighbour and village, field and well, hearth and home[.] ... I make sure they understand that the house they have just left will be tumbled, levelled back into the landscape. Mostly they're too weak and sick to take this in. (64)

Entering the poorhouse, then, entails not only dispossession, but the virtual obliteration of all traces of a family's existence.

The so-called "workhouse test" of destitution is followed by a medical examination and, finally, segregation, which is the hardest part of the process for the families to bear:

Men, women, boys, girls, proceed to separate quarters where they remain separate till they sign out, which is, in many cases, lights out. It can be noisy. The orderlies, most of them able-bodied paupers, are there to protect me and the admitting staff from outlandish behaviour, hysterical kneeling, shrieking and begging, the throwing of arms around our legs. (64-65)

For Murphy, presiding over admissions is work, "[n]ot pleasant but it becomes routine like all work" (64). This attitude suggests that he is indeed incapable of compassion, despite the fact that he, too, has been deprived of his family. At an earlier point in his story, he claims that he is not being cynical, only "candid about brutal facts." Admitting paupers, he writes, is his chief task:

From entry to exit, public ward to burial pit. Eighty-seven last week[.] ... It's what we Masters are paid for, processing paupers, and better paid than a postmaster or station-master, but they don't have to traffic with dysentery, cholera, typhus, or be present when we sign in families and then segregate them, husband from wife, parents from children, or listen to the crying and keening I'd almost ceased to hear. (47-48)

Here, as in the previous quote, Murphy expresses rather more concern for himself than for the unfortunate famine victims. Yet having refused to help his

sister and her child (and thereby wasted his only chance of regaining part of his family) for fear that his position as master be put into question, his “quenched heart” opens up to compassion, albeit too late. Indications of this change occasionally appear in his story in the form of a more sympathetic attitude to the asylum seekers. Their reaction to segregation, for instance, begins to make sense: “I do see a lot of them going mad with grief which I now understand in a deeper way” (48). And if he has seemed impervious to suffering and death, his sister’s fate has made huge cracks in his armour of indifference. “I must tell you”, he writes, “that many things I considered ridiculous [earlier] now appear to me in a very different and painful light” (47).

In March 1847, the *Mayo Constitution* reported that the Ballinrobe workhouse had turned into “one horrible charnel house” with “the unfortunate paupers being nearly all the victims of a fearful fever.”⁹³ Describing the institution as a charnel house may of course have been an exaggeration, but the editor of this newspaper was not alone in drawing the parallel. Asenath Nicholson, for one, saw fit to use the same terminology in regard to Irish workhouses in general. “[W]hen famine advanced”, she wrote, “when funds decreased, when the doors were besieged by imploring applicants, who wanted a place to die that they might be buried in a coffin, they were little else than charnel houses.”⁹⁴ What Murphy has to say about his poorhouse is no less suggestive of the analogy, although he does not use the exact words. “This place”, he writes, “has become a kind of Public School for the impoverished. Their only lesson? How to die, and I am death’s headmaster. Soon we’ll have to open another pit” (46). The imminent opening of yet another burial pit – the fourth on these premises, according to Lord Clonroy – indicates a high mortality rate, and so does an observation by Roisin’s mother in the idiot ward as she hears the tolling of the workhouse bell: “The Angelus, is it? ... Dead bell more like. Never quits here, nor the squeal of the dead cart” (106). Murphy refers to numbers of deaths on one occasion only. On Saint Patrick’s Day, he notes, “[t]hree died during Mass. The able-bodied carried them away to the dead cart and eternity” (49). Here again, he seems unaffected by suffering and death, yet when he emerges from his room after having written his “confession”, Lord Clonroy finds that he is acting “[v]ery out of character”:

[S]howed me lines from *The Nation* written by some poet who died young.

⁹³ Hamrock, *The Famine in Mayo*, p. 80.

⁹⁴ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 108.

*'I have seen death strike so fast
That churchyards could not hold
The bright-eyed and the bold.
I must be very, very old,
A very old, man.'*

He watched me reading and said,

- That's how I feel.

Clearly not himself yet. (79-80)

Although Clonroy admits that the way Annie and her child were found dead was "terrible", he does not understand why Murphy should be so utterly devastated by these deaths:

Irrational grief. Didn't want to put it blunt as that so asked him,

- What are you in mourning for? A three-year-old child or a strange woman who cursed you?

Finally he looked at me with something akin to hatred. The longer I live the less I understand the human heart. (77)

Clonroy's total inability to empathize with Murphy is perhaps not surprising since he is a man who professes not to feel the "heartbreak" of losing his son, albeit not to death. And if the grieving workhouse master is not "himself" as Clonroy has known him, he is certainly more like the youth we met at the beginning of his story who mourned the deaths of his parents and "wept enough to do [him] a lifetime" (37) after being separated from his sister.

Overcrowded, unsanitary workhouses, fever hospitals and sheds were breeding grounds for highly contagious diseases like "famine fever" (the generic term for typhus fever and relapsing fever) and dysentery. According to the historian Laurence M. Geary,

infected lice festered on the unwashed and susceptible skin of the hungry, multiplied in their filthy and tattered clothing, and went forth, carried the length and breadth of the country by a population who had taken to the roads, vagrants and beggars, as well as the evicted[.] ... Lice found new and unresisting hosts at food depots and relief works ... and in many public institutions, such as prisons and workhouses.⁹⁵

The human body louse, then, was the vector of "famine fever", but nineteenth-century doctors did not know this and attributed the causes and spread-

⁹⁵ Geary, "What people died of during the Famine", in Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150*, pp. 95-111 [103-04].

ing of fever to a number of more or less plausible reasons.⁹⁶ Murphy has his own theory about how typhus spreads: “I know. In fact I’m certain. It’s the water contaminated by corpses” (48). In an attempt to discover the reason for the increasing death rates in Irish workhouses in 1848, the fictionalized Viceroy (who appears under his real name in McCabe’s text) summons masters from all over the country to discuss the matter. During this meeting, Murphy presents his theory, but Lord Clarendon is sceptical:

– Mister Murphy? You’re not serious?

– I’m certain, I said. It’s putrefaction from burial pits leaking into workhouse wells, infecting staff and paupers. Our pit’s at the march of our twelve acres but I wouldn’t drink the water.

–Your paupers drink it?

– They have no choice, nor have we. With a thousand souls, we must pump water. (61)

Christine Kinealy has noted that “many burial sites were situated within the grounds of the workhouse, sometimes next to the water supply.”⁹⁷ Such was the case for example at Lurgan workhouse, as Dr Smith’s report to the Board of Health revealed. “It has been the custom”, he wrote,

to bury the dead in the immediate proximity of the Fever Hospital; many of the recent graves are scarcely four yards from the building. In the centre of this burial ground is the well from which the hospital is supplied with water; the graves were dug so close to it, that the water became muddy and unfit for use.⁹⁸

Dr Smith, too, apparently suspected that contaminated water was a factor in the diffusion of fever. “From the foregoing statement”, he continued, “it is not difficult to deduce the causes of the mortality which has lately devastated the Lurgan Workhouse, and which still continues.” Yet he came much closer to the real cause of contagion when he observed that

in consequence of the crowding of the house, the supply of clothes was quite inadequate, and ... it had hence become necessary to use the linen of some of those who had died of fever and dysentery, without the time having been afforded to have it washed and dried.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 101-02.

⁹⁷ Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine*, pp. 94-95.

⁹⁸ Dr R. Stephens, and Dr R.W. Smith, *Workhouses (Ireland): Abstract Copy of the Reports made to the Board of Health in Dublin, by the Medical Officers sent to inquire into the State of the Workhouses in Cork, Bantry, and Lurgan* (House of Commons: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1847), p. 14.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Should Murphy eventually decide to act upon his notion of becoming an inmate in his poorhouse and put on the smelly “rags of a dead pauper” (70) he has stored in the cupboard, he might learn the hard way how typhus really spreads. But McCabe leaves us in the dark as to whether the master ever reaches that decision.

Even if water contaminated by the drainage from burial pits did not contribute to the spreading of fever, it did play a part in the dissemination of other contagious diseases such as dysentery and cholera.¹⁰⁰ As mortality rates soared during the winter and spring of 1847, workhouse guardians throughout the country were faced with the problem of how to dispose of deceased inmates. Due to the fear of contagion, people in many areas objected to the burial of workhouse paupers in parochial graveyards. From Ballyshannon, for example, the master reported that “[r]esistance has been offered to the interment of the dead at several burying grounds in the neighbourhood.”¹⁰¹ Such resistance left the guardians in several unions with no choice but to bury their constantly increasing number of dead within the workhouse grounds. Alerted by medical officers to the health hazards arising from this burial practice, the Poor Law Commissioners attempted to put a stop to it. In a circular to each of the unions, dated 11 August 1847, the chief clerk wrote:

The Poor Law Commissioners have on several recent occasions had their attention drawn to the practice, which has been introduced in some Unions in Ireland, of using part of the workhouse ground as a burial place for deceased inmates of the workhouse. The Commissioners have reason to know, from facts which have been brought under their notice, that this practice is open to serious objections in a sanitary point of view, and they are desirous, therefore, that it should be at once discontinued.¹⁰²

In the same circular, Boards of Guardians were urged to purchase or hire land “detached from the workhouse site” that could be used as a cemetery. In many localities, however, this proved an unrealizable option since landowners were reluctant to lease or sell land for the purpose of pauper burials. Consequently, the practice of intramural interment continued, of necessity, in a number of unions, contrary to the orders of the Commissioners.¹⁰³ From Murphy’s point

¹⁰⁰ According to Laurence Geary, dysentery is spread by, among other things, “pollution of the water by faeces infected with the bacillus.” Geary, “What people died of during the Famine”, p. 106.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Anthony Begley and Soinbhe Lally, “The Famine in County Donegal”, in Kinealy and Parkhill (eds), *The Famine in Ulster*, pp. 77-98 [89].

¹⁰² Commissioners of Irish Poor Laws, *First Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for Relief of the Poor in Ireland* (Dublin: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1848), p. 60.

¹⁰³ See Anne Lanigan, “Tipperary Workhouse Children and the Famine”, *Tipperary Historical Journal* (1995), pp. 54-76 [60-61].

of view, a simple solution to the problem would be to burn the corpses, and in his meeting with the Viceroy, he proposes this method of disposal. But Clarendon will not even consider such an alternative to burial: "The Church of Rome, he said, will not discuss cremation. I will not antagonise them." Murphy fails to understand why the Church should object to official cremation. "[W]hen families die of typhus", he points out, "the hovel's burned over them and the clergy sprinkle ashes. That's cremation surely? Why pretend it's not?" The Viceroy, who obviously does not have the power to influence the Church in this or any other matter, evades the question: "I cannot answer for the Church of Rome, Clarendon muttered. To which I [Murphy] almost added, An institution run by hypocrites for idiots" (62).

Murphy's aversion to institutional religion and clergymen, be they Catholic or Protestant, surfaces intermittently throughout his narrative. He sees the clergy as "devious ... masters of promise and pretence" (50), and if he had his way, he would

consign most holy men to the idiot wards but then the paupers would be desolate. They cling to them, hang on every word. Heaven's next door, over the hill, upstairs, round the corner, destination of the destitute. Naked, diseased, raving, filthy and skeletal, they go straight to the arms of Jesus and Mary! It's alms we need from Jesus and Mary to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. (62)

Here, Murphy seems to suggest that the clergy did nothing much for their starving and dying flocks beyond repeatedly instilling the, in his view false, hope of heavenly reward in them. This challenges the prevailing contemporary view that clergymen of all denominations took an active part in the relief work. The clerical effort was commended by, among many others, the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, who remarked that "Catholic and Protestant clergymen vie with one another in acts of benevolence" and that "perfect harmony ... distinguishes the ministers of religion of all classes."¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Smith, on the other hand, claimed that "the Protestant clergy are coming forward actively giving time and money with zeal", but "[n]ot so the Roman Catholic priesthood – at least not by any means so generally."¹⁰⁵ Asenath Nicholson, too, admitted that while some of the Catholic clergy "were indefatigable ... in their labors ... others looked more passively on." Yet she was also careful to point out that one of the main reasons for this passivity was that "a great proportion of them are quite poor", which made it impossible for them to provide material help

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Kerr, *A Nation of Beggars*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁵ Thomson and McGusty (eds), *The Irish Journals of Elizabeth Smith*, p. 129.

for the starving poor in the long run.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the alleged “perfect harmony” between clerics of different persuasions was evidently not universal, especially among workhouse chaplains. According to Thomas O’Neill, relations between them were “strained” in some workhouses, and Margaret Preston has observed that the records of Irish workhouses “give a clear sense of sectarian tensions – particularly between the workhouse clergy.”¹⁰⁷ In McCabe’s fictional poorhouse, sectarian antagonism mounts as Brendan Galligan, the Catholic curate, and Norman Stringer, the Protestant chaplain, repeatedly accuse each other of attempting to indoctrinate the workhouse children. Murphy instances the kind of complaints by the respective clerics that he has to “write up again and again”: Galligan “objects forcefully” to Stringer “deliberately reading the Bible in the school house with Papist children present”, while Stringer “protests angrily” that Galligan “brings in and distributes ‘bagfulls of rosaries, medals, trinkets and other such trumpery to Protestant children during school hours” (49). McCabe’s representation of religious controversy in the workhouse is particularly noteworthy because it indicates that Catholics, too, attempted to make converts. By contrast, the history books examined here make no mention of Catholic proselytising, whether in workhouses or elsewhere.¹⁰⁸ Yet as Patrick Hickey has shown, proselytism was not an exclusively Protestant activity during the Famine. In 1848, the Society of St Vincent de Paul claimed to have converted “as many as 300 persons who had always been Protestants” in the parish of Schull, County Cork. Although the claim was dismissed by a Protestant in the pages of the *Cork Constitution*, the writer nevertheless insisted that here existed “a proselytising society that labours to convert Protestants.”¹⁰⁹

Galligan and Stinger’s persistent efforts to proselytize the workhouse children give Murphy an additional reason to vent his dislike of clergymen. “And these fellows call themselves apostles of Christ”, he fulminates. “Holy

¹⁰⁶ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁷ O’Neill, “The Catholic Clergy and the Great Famine”, p. 463; Margaret Preston, “‘We cannot but regret the great delay’: Reflections on the Writings of the North Dublin Union Guardians during the Famine”, in David Valone (ed.), *Ireland’s Great Hunger: Relief, Representation and Remembrance* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), pp. 21–36 [21]. In a footnote, Preston gives one example of such tensions in the North Dublin Union workhouse (p. 32, n. 1).

¹⁰⁸ Kinealy and Donnelly briefly refer to the practice of “souperism”, i.e. providing the Catholic poor with food in exchange for conversion to Protestantism (Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, p. 142; Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 234). Roger McHugh notes that souperism figures prominently in folklore as a cause of bitterness among Catholics (Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, pp. 110–11), while Mitchel and Woodham-Smith do not bring up the subject at all.

¹⁰⁹ Hickey, *The Famine in West Cork*, p. 245.

men? Holy God, Holy hell! Stupid, stupid, stupid men! And I'm obliged to nod to both" (49). He is also obliged to nod to what he sees as the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in the matter of cremation. Since the Church will not discuss cremation, as Clarendon put it, Murphy has to continue burying the dead in mass pits on workhouse ground, and the male inmates are tasked with the digging. Thus McCabe highlights another grim aspect of life in some workhouses that historians have tended to overlook.¹¹⁰ Murphy admits that [m]ost masters don't like using paupers for the pit digging" but defends his course of action on the grounds of economy: "Hired labour, being costly, meant less money to buy food and every circular from the Castle [the Poor Law Commission] used the word 'rationalise' at least three times" (46). As regards the financing of poor law relief, Jim McLaughlin has noted that "[n]owhere was greater economy taken than in measures to reduce the cost of maintaining paupers in workhouses."¹¹¹ Such measures included cutting down on the already frugal dietary, which led to inmates being half-starved like those James Hack Tuke found at Glenties. Murphy chooses to rationalize in other ways, yet the overcrowding of his workhouse and the consequent financial problems render the provision of adequate food difficult. He does not give us any details of the workhouse diet, but the ironic tone of his remark on the saying of grace before meals suggests that the food rations are less than sufficient:

[A]s a practising hypocrite, I'm moderately gifted. My position here obliges me to give out morning and evening prayers and grace before meals.

- Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which of thy bounty we are about to receive. (62)

To Murphy, the notion of a bountiful workhouse meal is manifestly absurd, whoever is perceived as the donor of the "gift." There is a further allusion to the scantiness of the workhouse fare in his account of the "treat" which the inmates receive on Saint Patrick's Day: "Wilson's bakery donated a thousand sweet fingers to mark the day. One each at noon. Amid the fast a pauper's feast. Fingers of death" (49). His description of the fasting paupers attending the "feast" lays bare the dreariness and misery of workhouse life:

¹¹⁰ One exception is the local historian John Cunningham, who refers to this practice at Linskeakea workhouse in his book *The Great Silence: The Famine in Fermanagh 1845-1850* (Belleek, Co. Fermanagh: Davog Press, 2012), p. 198.

¹¹¹ Jim McLaughlin, "The Management of Famine in Donegal", in John Crowley et al (eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), pp. 450-57 [455].

Galligan said Mass in the men's yard with my permission. Segregation was strictly enforced, as always. Chaos otherwise, mothers with suckling infants excepted, though mostly they're suckling at nothing. All trooping out to kneel like ghosts in the March sunlight[.] ... They all sang feebly, Galligan leading loudly,

- Hail glorious, Saint Patrick, dear saint of our isle,

On us, thy poor children, bestow a sweet smile.

Stringer, our chaplain, kept his poor Protestants apart in the main hall, hymning their way to heaven. (48-49)

The stories of Roisin, her mother, and Reggie Murphy contain the whole spectrum of workhouse horrors: the sundering of families, "sickly foul" dormitories (39), the "screamin' hell" of the idiot ward (106), overcrowding, hunger, prostitution for survival, disease, mass death, "the dead burying the dead" (46). With his spare, incisive prose – the effect of which is enhanced by his tendency to imply rather than spell out – and with his use of the vernacular and of the first-person perspective, McCabe captures the gruesome reality of workhouse life in a way so powerful as to surpass the most graphic descriptions by contemporary observers or the fact-based, often statistic-centred accounts by historians. He shows us that in these "grim bastilles of despair" (76), there is no life, only bare existence. And he makes us – or at least me – doubt the alleged consolation of religion for those confined in these institutions. The half-starved "ghosts" attending Mass sing "feebly", which signals their weakened condition, but perhaps also a lack of enthusiasm for religious observance and a diminishing faith in God's mercy. In the idiot ward, Roisin's mother prays to the Virgin Mary: "Reach me down comfort, O Virgin most powerful. Cover me with sleep and sleep and sleep till my eyes open at the feet of Christ" (106). Yet her incessant praying brings no solace, no respite from the guilt and remorse haunting her day and night. And although she declares her faith in God's mercy and keeps repeating the phrase "Thy will be done", that faith has been shaken by the traumatic event of famine:

[W]hat was it we done on You, Lord, made You punish us that way, blight our praties, turn Your head away, then turn it back to watch us starve and sicken, go mad and die? Our poor sins, was it? What harm did they do You? What harm? (106-07)

Even to the pious Mary, then, it seems that God has abandoned the famine victims. A cold heaven is watching, but withholding response.

6.3. The question of responsibility

As noted earlier, contemporary observers differed in their perception of who or what the Irish poor held responsible for the famine disaster. While some eyewitnesses found that the victims saw it as a punishment from God, others reported that they blamed either the landlords or the British government or both. Contradictory views on the question of responsibility emerge from the folklore record, too, but according to Carmel Quinlan, “[t]here is no demonising of public personalities and very little mention of England’s role.” Her reading of the records leads her to conclude that “[t]he villains are the landlord (but not always), the shopkeeper, the soup-kitchen ‘master’ and occasionally the farmer.”¹¹² Cormac Ó Gráda concurs with this view, stating that “[f]or the most part, folklore’s focus and concerns – and the targets of its angers – are purely local.”¹¹³ Yet as James Donnelly has observed,

the relative rarity of specific denunciations of the British government in famine folklore should not be interpreted to mean that victims and survivors of the famine had little or no grasp of hostile forces beyond those that they could see at close hand.¹¹⁴

The cultural and literary critic David Lloyd has presented a similar argument. In his view, the claim that the Famine was mostly seen as God’s punishment for various sins

denies any secular, historical consciousness to the peasantry of the 1840s by removing the Famine from the framework of human acts and motivations. Accordingly, it precludes the possibility of a political or economic understanding of the Famine on the part of the peasantry and, of course, makes it improbable that there was any consciousness of Ireland as a colonized country circulating among the poor, despite the contemporaneous work of Young Ireland and Daniel O’Connell or the continual agrarian protests of the previous four decades or more.¹¹⁵

If some historians have found that the Irish poor generally did not blame the British government, McCabe questions this view by ascribing an awareness of “hostile forces” beyond the immediate locality to an uneducated peasant woman. When Tom Brady refers to Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant, as “a born gentleman”, his wife snaps back at him: “It’s the like of that fine born gentleman

¹¹² Quinlan, “‘A punishment from God’: The Famine in the Centenary Folklore Questionnaire”, p. 73.

¹¹³ Ó Gráda, *Black ’47 and Beyond*, p. 198.

¹¹⁴ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 38.

¹¹⁵ David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), p. 33.

has made a hell out of this whole island” (14-15). This suggests that Mary sees Clarendon not only as the personification of a predatory aristocracy, but also of an oppressive government. Locked up in the idiot ward, brooding on how “mad-eyed hunger and death” (120) have ruined her family and her life, she blames the colonizer more specifically:

What had we to live for, the most of us? Not a bite in the house bar England's charity, the stirabout of India meal. A dose of the skitters, they sent us, gravel and shite, and their great ships sailin' from our ports half foundered with food from every townland of Ireland to feed their murderin' armies at the four ends of the earth. May they suffer one day for what they done to us. (122)

Mary thus contends that, rather than alleviating hunger, “England’s charity” in the form of maize has exacerbated the suffering of the poor by making them sick. A number of contemporary observations indicate that this claim is not groundless. A clergyman in County Londonderry noted that, as a result of the sudden change in diet from potatoes to Indian meal in 1846, the people “were visited with a most wasting dysentery.”¹¹⁶ Dr Dillon of Castlebar attributed intestinal disorders to the poor quality of the meal which was imperfectly ground, containing “a large portion of the husk and skin.”¹¹⁷ Asenath Nicholson, too, saw a clear connection between the consumption of Indian meal – “this frightful formidable”, as she called it – and dysentery. According to her, the maize was not only poorly ground but often damaged already in transit from America. “Another sad evil prevalent in nearly all the relief shops”, she wrote,

was damaged Indian meal[.] ... [T]he unground corn that was sent from America and bought by the Government of England, and carried round the coast and then ground in the mills, which did not take off the hull, much of it having been damaged on the water, became wholly unfit for use and was a most dangerous article for any stomach[.] ... [W]hen the half-starved poor, who had been kept all their life on potatoes, took this sour, mouldy, harsh food, dysentery must be the result.¹¹⁸

When she visited the workhouse in Westport, the inmates told her that “the ‘yaller [yellow] Indian’ ... swells us and takes the life of us.”¹¹⁹ Damaged meal was still sold in some localities in 1847. In March, Emily Irwin of Boyle, County

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Trevor Parkhill, “The Famine in Londonderry”, in Kinealy and Parkhill (eds), *The Famine in Ulster*, pp. 147-67 [156].

¹¹⁷ Quoted in MacArthur, “Medical History of the Famine”, in Edwards and Williams (eds), *The Great Famine*, p. 285.

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, pp. 35, 105.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Roscommon, reported that the meal, “which the poor find does not agree with them”, came “in casks and [was] not freshly ground.” In July, H.J. McCarrick wrote from Aclare, County Sligo, to the Society of Friends, saying that “[t]he last meal which I received from the government stores was commencing to malt, being in large lumps, which were sour or indeed not very well liked by the peasantry.”¹²⁰

Mary’s disdain of “England’s charity” echoes that of Mitchel, although he gave vent to it in more withering language when he wrote:

Keep your alms, ye canting robbers; – button your pockets upon the Irish plunder that is in them; ... [w]e spit upon the benevolence that robs us of a pound and flings back a penny in *charity*. [original emphasis]¹²¹

Mary’s charge that England is using the produce exported from Ireland to feed “their murderin’ armies” around the world also invites comparison with Mitchel. In his second letter to the small farmers of Ireland published in the *United Irishman*, the paper he founded in 1848 after he left the *Nation*, he referred to the case (reported in the *Limerick Chronicle*) of William Boland, who cultivated twenty acres in Tulla, County Clare. In January 1848, the farmer and his two daughters were found dead, and the coroner’s inquest stated that they had perished from hunger and cold. They had not had “a morsel of food” for three days prior to their demise, their bedding had been sold to pay the rates, and they had nothing to keep them warm. “Now, what became of poor Boland’s twenty acres of crop?” Mitchel asked. “Part of it”, he explained,

went to Gibraltar, to victual the garrison – part to South Africa, to provision the robber-army; part went to Spain, to pay for the landlord’s [Colonel Wyndham’s] wine – part to London to pay the interest of his honor’s mortgage to the Jews. The English ate some of it ... and there was *none* for Boland. [original emphasis]¹²²

So while the Irish peasants were dying, the crops they had raised sustained the garrisons and “robber-armies” of the “Empire of Hell” as well as Irish landlordism – a system which, implicitly, was an integral part of that empire. Mary’s tirade against England, then, accords with the views of Mitchel (and of many other contemporaries) on the inadequacy of the British relief effort and the anomaly of exporting food from a country afflicted with famine. At the same

¹²⁰ Swords, *In Their Own Words*, pp. 156, 207.

¹²¹ Mitchel in the *Nation*, October 1847, reprinted in *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, pp. 130–31.

¹²² Mitchel, “To the Small Farmers of Ireland. Letter II”, *United Irishman*, 4 March 1848.

time, it challenges the notion that the peasantry had little or no understanding of England's role in the unfolding disaster.

But while Mary blames England, she also holds forces close to home responsible for the suffering she and her family have endured. In a fit of rage, she curses Lord Clonroy, to whom she refers by his real name, Skinner, and his hirelings:

May the Devil fuck them! Oh God, forgive my tongue but may He double fuck them down to hell, and his hired brutes skewered us for rent of land was ours, that tumbled us into the jaws of winter when the praties failed, that left us without sow or cow, calf or clucking hen, that tipped my flax-wheel and my stool, my poor pillows of meadowsweet, like dead things into a sheugh, whose flunkys cut my nightlines set for pikes in the lough at Tirnahinch, that took my sleep from me, and my family from me, and my wits from me, ... that left me naked in the bog of Scart astray in the head and chewin' on bitter sorrel. Oh Christ the Judge, there's no forgivin' the like, none now, or ever more, Amen. (122-23)

Coming from a person who, according to Roisin, is not "in her right mind" (30), the validity of these accusations may be somewhat questionable. For example, there is no clear evidence in any of the other three stories that the Bradys have been evicted. Galligan, the curate, does claim that the family were evicted and that their house was "tumbled and burned" (98), but from Roisin's and Murphy's stories, we can infer that the house was not destroyed until after all the family members except Roisin were gone. Roisin herself never mentions the "tumbling", but when Murphy arrives to take her to the poorhouse, he finds her "sitting among the ruins of a tumbled cottage" (38). In her deranged state of mind, Mary is perhaps confusing her own family with that of her sister's, who were evicted "into cruel December" (33). Her claim that the landlord left them "without sow or cow, calf or clucking hen" suggests that the Brady's livestock were distrained by Clonroy's "brutes", but according to Roisin, the pig died, the cow had to be sold (presumably to pay the rent), and the fowl were eaten.¹²³ If Clonroy has demanded payment of rent in spite of the famine, he could of course be held indirectly responsible for the family's losses, but there was evidently no distraint of livestock involved. Finally, in view of what we know about Mary's treatment of her husband and of her daughters, accusing Clonroy of

¹²³ "In an effort to collect arrears of rent from tenants unable – or sometimes unwilling – to pay, landlords and agents had long been accustomed to seize tenants' livestock and to 'drive' the beasts to the local pound, where they were held until either redeemed by payment of the arrears or sold in satisfaction of the debt. The proper legal term for this procedure was distraint." Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 138.

taking her family from her is surely unreasonable, and a futile attempt to ease the burden of her own feelings of guilt.

Lord Clonroy realizes that, as a landlord, he is blamed for the famine disaster by the Irish and the English alike, but he refuses to accept the role of scapegoat. As he sees it, there is at least one obvious answer to the question of what, and by extension who, is to blame:

I know the answer in a word, or two[.] ... *Improvvidence. Congenital improvidence.* Devil-me-care, happy-go-lucky children. Next week's a hundred years off. When they get money every farthing's gulped in shebeens and pissed out in sheughs. Raving lunatics then, reciting and bellowing out dismal ballads about lost battles, dispossession, and glorious Celtic past! Drunken and shifty living in shit with pigs and fowl! Christ alone knows the swarming incest rife in those wretched hovels! How otherwise? Blame us for that too? Of course. [original emphasis] (80-81)

Here, Clonroy joins the chorus of contemporaries who regarded the Irish peasants as improvident, lazy, disaffected, ignorant, drunken, indifferent to squalor and, therefore, themselves responsible for the dreadful consequences of the potato blight. With the reference to incest, he adds another dimension to the list of perceived Irish vices and moral failings. While Mary Brady's account of her life before marriage strongly suggests that there were occurrences of incest within *her* family, Clonroy's allegation amounts to a sweeping slur on the Irish character in general, and as such, it is surely unjustified. As it turns out, the charge of sexual perversion rebounds on his own family with the discovery that Mathew, his homosexual son, has abused a stableboy. Mathew's "fouling [of] innocence" apparently serves to remind Clonroy that people who live in glass houses should not throw stones. "Dear God", he notes in his diary, "what a reversal of shame" (102).

A few of Clonroy's diary entries suggest that he is not totally impervious to the suffering that surrounds him. "Worse than plague. Indescribable", he writes in the summer of 1847:

Every other day the odour of blight mentioned. *Phytophthora infestans*. Death smell. Death knell more like. All over. Terrible reports. Every province. Towns, townlands, villages, cities, seashores. All heading for the ports and America. God help them. Will He? Will America? Can anyone? Poor-houses a wretched answer. (84)

In March 1848, he notes that the famine is "if anything worse than last year" (90), and in a note on the steadily increasing death rate a month later, there is a hint of pity for the victims:

Two and a half thousand dying every week now from Malin to Dingle. Workhouse figures only. God knows how many more unrecorded, unburied out through the islands, mountains and bogs. (80)

Yet the sincerity of such intimations of compassion might be questioned in view of his tendency to blame the sufferers themselves. In addition to their improvidence and debauchery, he sees their ignorance as a contributing factor to their plight. “For years”, he complains,

I told my cottiers God had created a hundred vegetables for us to live on. Surely you can grow enough to feed yourselves and your families. How do they answer? They fall on their knees and whine,

- We have no brain, your honour, to grow vegetables like gentlefolk. Only the praties, your honour[.] ...

Christ in heaven, what is to be done with such people? (95-96)

Merely telling the cottiers that there are alternative sources of food will hardly remedy their ignorance of how to produce them. As Thomas Campbell Foster pointed out in his reports from Ireland in 1845-46, “the poor tenant [cannot] be blamed for his want of skill and knowledge in the cultivation of his land, when he has often no opportunity of learning better.” Rather, Foster thought, the fault lay with “the impolitic landlord.”¹²⁴ Clonroy, however, sees no reason to reproach himself since he attempted to help his cottiers in 1847 by giving them vegetable seeds and translating the instructions for how to “sow, thin, weed, mulch, water.” In his opinion “[a] child of five could do it”, but the result was “[a] mass of weeds in lazy beds.” Exasperated by what he considers the tenants’ feeble excuses for their failure to produce anything, he gives vent to his indignation in a sardonic diary note:

The pigeons, rabbits, squirrels, daws, magpies, rats and mice, all regiments of the vermin world converging on one pratie plot! And who’s to blame? The landlords of Ireland! Convenient to have a bogeyman to flog for everything that goes wrong in life! (96)

His effort to educate and help might of course be commended, but it comes too late, and he does not realize that a “pratie plot” is likely to be too small, too poor, or both, for growing enough vegetables to feed a large family. Nor does he recognize the flogger of bogeymen in himself.

In his ruminations on other possible explanations for the devastating consequences of the potato failures, Clonroy reiterates the common view that the “sur-

¹²⁴ Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland*, p. 63.

plus” population, dependent on “the capricious growth of a single root”,¹²⁵ had paved the way for disaster. In his view, the blame for the population explosion is attributable to the Catholic clergy rather than to the Irish themselves since “Rome” is “[m]anufacturing and baptising hundreds of thousands of impoverished wretches” (81). Moreover, he asserts, their constant preaching against immorality results only in promiscuity, early marriages, and impossibly large families:

Thundering every other Sunday ... about God’s ‘punishment’ for being natural. Coupling in ditches mostly. Marry at sixteen. Ten years later, enormous families living in starving squalor. (97)

Having “manufactured” these “enormous families”, the representatives of Rome then fail to help their starving flocks when famine strikes – or such is the case with the local clergy, if Clonroy is to be believed. When he calls on the parish priest and the curate, Galligan, he finds them living in comfort: “Smell of bacon and cabbage. Slated foursquare house like strong farmer’s. God’s earthy agents. Glossy bullocks on front pasture” (96). Clonroy explains “the merits of vegetable varieties to them and asks them to “talk about this at Sunday mass” and to urge their parishioners to apply themselves to growing alternatives to the potato, but to his chagrin, they give him the cold shoulder: “They listened, with reserve. ‘Perfidious Albion’? Am I? Fatheads! How could vegetable growing be a landlord’s trap?” Their refusal to cooperate and their apparent prosperity in the midst of starvation give Clonroy additional reasons to point an accusing finger at them. “They’re the bogeymen”, he fumes, “with their pigs and bullocks, their black suits and dog collars” (97).

If there is anything in McCabe’s representation of the Famine that might appear polemical to some readers, it would perhaps be the negative image of institutional religion that emerges from all four stories. For Clonroy, “most religion is make-believe” (52), and consequently, he only “pretends” to be a “believing person” (101). He has no more patience with the sermons of Stringer, the Church of Ireland chaplain, than with those of the Catholic priests:

Does he [Stringer] believe the pious nonsense he preaches? Does anyone? Certainly doesn’t practice. Not a word to his daughter Norma since she married Fitzpatrick, the Papish corn merchant. (95)

His aversion to religion becomes even clearer when he learns that his son has converted to Catholicism and is about to enter a Jesuit seminary in Spain. Explaining this to his wife, he realizes, will be difficult since she sees Rome as evil:

¹²⁵ Hughes, *A Lecture on the Antecedent Causes of the Irish Famine*, p. 4.

Far from Christ, I'll agree, and remind her of 'England's hallowed walls founded on King Henry's balls.' Our Church here the poor eunuch over the water. Would God bother His celestial arse with either? Or with Rome, Constantinople, Avignon, or a hundred other variations? Christianity as much to do with Christ as a pack of dogs snarling over their own vomit. Won't say that, though. (101)

In Clonroy's view, then, the fundamental defect of religion as practised by Christianity is its lack of true Christian values. The workhouse master, Clonroy notes in his diary, has "a view of Romishness more jaundiced than mine" (97). There is certainly ample evidence of Murphy's resentment of the Catholic clergy in his story, but it extends beyond mere disgust with priests to include Protestant as well as Catholic bigotry. It is sectarian tensions and ill-will that have destroyed his dream of inheriting the farm at Derrylester from Sam Ferguson, his foster-father. "[N]ames do matter", he notes bitterly:

Ours, Murphy, is like a brand here in Ulster, and even though I was moulded and educated to their likeness I was bred from the conquered tribe. Stupidly, I'd ignored what I'd heard them mulling over in their hot whiskies.

- Aye, you can rear the wild thing, Sam, and ye think ye know it, but someday it'll growl and tear your throat out. The identical same with Taigs. Keep an eye, keep your distance, keep them out. (54)

In the eyes of his own lot, Murphy is a "landlord's lackey", a "traitor to Ireland", and an "Ulster turncoat" (43, 60). Stigmatized by both sides of the sectarian divide, he ends up isolated, embittered and, by his own admission, unkind.

Roisin, heartbroken by the suffering and death of her sister whom she loved "most in the world" (18), receives a severe scolding but not a word of consolation from the priest Galligan. The girls, he declares, "have disgraced [the] parish", and Grace's death is "a judgement of God on [their] mad capers" (28). Their pious mother agrees with the priest that the girls are to blame, yet she herself is by no means above reproach. Mary's fear of shame, fuelled by the rigid moralism of the Catholic Church, obliterates all motherly concern for a daughter's welfare, and Grace pays for this with her life. In one of McCabe's short stories from 1978, two siblings briefly reflect on the topic of religion and the brother concludes that "religion puts people mad." "No", his sister replies, "religion puts them madder."¹²⁶ John Banville has suggested that McCabe "has an older generation's deep resentment of religion, which he sees as having blighted the lives

¹²⁶ Eugene McCabe, "Music at Annahullion", in *Heaven Lies About Us: Stories* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 63-73 [65]. First published in *Heritage and Other Stories* (London: Gollancz, 1978).

of so many Irish men and women down the troubled generations.”¹²⁷ There is indeed little, if any, sympathy with religion in McCabe’s oeuvre, most of which accentuates the disabling forces of Church hypocrisy, excessive piety, and sectarian bigotry. In *Tales from the Poorhouse*, McCabe shows how these forces can combine to exacerbate the impact of famine. Even if his own critical attitude to religion informs the stories of his characters, readers are nevertheless invited to make up their own minds about its benefits or drawbacks as they emerge from the viewpoints of the four protagonists. In other words, there is no authorial polemic in the sense of coerciveness involved. It is also worth noting that McCabe makes a clear distinction between religion and faith. While Roisin detests what she perceives as her mother’s hollow piety, her obsession with Catholic moral codes, her never-ending sermons about sin and death, and Galligan’s “threats of hell” (34), she still seems to retain her belief in God, even after the unnecessary suffering and death of her beloved sister. Murphy, who designates himself as neither Catholic nor Protestant, asks himself: “How can anyone look about the world and not believe in a God” (45)? And when it dawns on him just how cruelly he has treated his sister in refusing to acknowledge her and thereby causing the death of her and her child, it is to God he ultimately turns, begging for forgiveness. The many, and not always idle references to God in Clonroy’s story indicate that, despite his claim that he is not a believing person, he does believe in some kind of higher power that has nothing to do with the “make-believe” of religion. What McCabe is suggesting, then, is that faith is not necessarily contingent on religion.

Clonroy never blames the British government explicitly, but he objects to what he sees as their unjust policy of charging the landlords with the entire burden of relief. When Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant visits Eden Hall in March 1848, Clonroy learns that the government is determined to make no further concessions to Ireland. Clarendon reports that Russell, the Prime Minister, has told him that

[o]ur people here [in England] aren’t evicting whole villages into the jaws of winter. Migrating by the hundred thousand! ... From now on we’ll let your Irish landlords support the paupers they evict, not the British treasury. (94)

Stung by Russell’s implication that all Irish landlords are engaged in dispossessing and shipping off their tenants in droves, Clonroy attempts to deny any involvement on his part in such undertakings. “I’m no villain”, he asserts, “I’ve no secret wish to evict, hang, starve or transport the poorest of the poor which

¹²⁷ Banville, “Deliver into darkness”, *The Boston Globe*, 18 April 2004.

some are accusing us of” (94). Despite the claim that he harbours no desire to get rid of impoverished tenants, we know that he has in fact evicted the Callaghans, who might be just one family among others never referred to. And his diary reveals that he does “transport” tenants, although it gives no indication of the numbers involved. “Like other landowners”, he writes, “if they forgo their plots I pay passage to America, to anywhere” (95). Here, McCabe obliquely touches on the ethics of landlord-assisted emigration, and Clonroy apparently has no qualms about sending out his pauper tenants. Through Murphy’s story, McCabe provides readers with a different angle on the matter. Prior to becoming the master of the poorhouse, Murphy is hired by Lord Lansdowne “to emigrate three thousand tenants from his estate in Kenmare in the County of Kerry.”¹²⁸ As Murphy tells it, the prospective emigrants were “clamouring for tickets” and, once on their way, they were “elated.” Yet at the same time they were “heartbroken” since they were bidding “farewell forever” to Ireland (59). In retrospect, the dark irony of their elation is brought home to him:

Most of them had never been more than a mile or so outside their own townland[.] ... In their own heads, I suppose, they were bound for the excitements of another world, a great adventure, not knowing that one in five would indeed end up in another world, ocean deep. (60)

Although Murphy is not directly responsible for sending people to their deaths in “coffin ships”, the subsequent controversy surrounding landlord-assisted emigration scares him off the well-paid job. “Last year”, he writes with reference to 1847,

of the two-hundred-and-twenty-thousand emigrated, forty thousand died on the way or on arrival. It was nothing like that when I was down there but I became uneasy as newspapers began writing of ‘Extermination’, ‘Bloodletting’, and ‘Innocents consigned to the deep’, and described me as ‘An Ulster turncoat, the cruel whipmaster of Lansdowne’s death riders.’ (60)

Murphy does not comment on the justifiability or otherwise of landlord-assisted emigration, and so McCabe, in accordance with his own awareness of “how difficult it can be to judge with complete certainty”,¹²⁹ leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions.

Clonroy is on the verge of bankruptcy, the bank has refused another mortgage, and he is forced to put his estate up for sale. What has brought about this

¹²⁸ McCabe allows himself some historical licence here in order to raise the subject of landlord-assisted emigration. The Lansdowne emigration scheme was carried out in the early eighteen-fifties.

¹²⁹ McCabe, “Golden Jubilee Address to the Clogher Historical Society”, p. 847.

disastrous state of affairs? As noted earlier, historians have attributed the financial embarrassment of many Irish landlords to several causes ranging from extravagance, accumulated debts, mismanagement of estates, encumbrances, poor rates and other taxes, and loss of rental income, to a combination of all these. In his diary, Clonroy refers to only one of them – the poor rates. “As chairman [of the workhouse Board of Guardians] and biggest landowner”, he writes,

all starving poor lodged in new poorhouse to my account. Six hundred and eighty-seven paupers last year at four pounds per annum, per pauper. Can’t be done. Has me near pauperised. Irish Squireens refusing to pay. As RM, I have no choice. (85)

In other words, the government’s insistence that Irish property pay for Irish poverty has him ruined, and thus McCabe turns Mitchel’s notion of a collusion between the Irish landlords and the British government to destroy the “surplus” population on its head. At the same time, he alerts readers to the fact that lesser, in many cases Irish Catholic landowners within a Poor Law union sometimes defaulted on their rate payments, thereby putting an additional burden on their more conscientious neighbours. Even if the poor rates are a serious drain on Clonroy’s finances, the question of whether meeting these liabilities alone could plunge the owner of twenty thousand acres into near bankruptcy remains. James Donnelly has noted that “for landlords already squeezed by lost rents, the rent burden pinched hard”,¹³⁰ but there are no complaints about unpaid rents to be found in Clonroy’s diary. There are, however, some indications that the estate has become unprofitable, perhaps as a result of neglect or mismanagement over a longer period of time. Clonroy apparently has substantial debts already when he and his wife return to Ireland from India since it is Dot who funds the restoration and improvement of the house and demesne. She “spent lavishly”, Clonroy writes:

Re-roofed the house and stables, built a water tower, new entrances. Miles of enclosing wall. Gave employment. Also gained her deeds to house, grounds and gardens. Entitlement to change the name. (88)

Already at this point, long before the Great Famine, she warns him that he must make the property pay, but he has apparently not been very successful. In June 1847, the poor rates are “long overdue” and the bank has “said no to a second mortgage” (84). Dot pays the rates, but the estate is beyond saving and the day of sale is fixed for less than a year later.

¹³⁰ Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 151.

Although Clonroy tries hard to vindicate himself by blaming others, he is occasionally troubled by a feeling that he has perhaps not done enough to help the starving people. His neighbours, the Leslies of Glaslough, have set up their own soup kitchen where they are feeding “hungry tenants, beggars and stray paupers” (73), and in a letter to his fellow landlords of South Ulster, Leslie urges them to do the same. Clonroy might be inclined to follow Leslie’s example, but Dot will not even consider such an arrangement: “Must we commit suicide because they’re too lazy to provide for themselves?”, she asks, adding that “I will not agree to a soup kitchen in our courtyard, Robert, and, if you do, I’m leaving. Immediately.” “Field Marshal Knoggs piping”, Clonroy comments, “[m]ust I follow” (74)? Apparently he must, since it is Dot who holds the purse strings, but he is uneasy about his failure to answer Leslie’s call to action: “Did nothing about it at the time. Is that ... suspect? Not much I could do” (72). The hen-pecked husband has an excuse, but one that does not seem quite good enough even to himself. A few days after receiving Leslie’s letter, Clonroy himself nevertheless rejects the notion that feeding the famished hordes will solve things: “How to cure poverty? By feeding? Insane! By ignoring? Heartless. Teach them to provide for themselves. If they refuse they’re digging their graves. If we feed them we’re digging ours” (95). He is certainly right in concluding that the provision of gratuitous food will not “cure” long-term poverty, and Leslie, whose call is for temporary relief, knows this as well. “I know all the objections”, he writes in his letter,

but common humanity and selfish interest suggest that common sense must be laid aside until this crisis is over. If we allow the poorest of the poor to die on our doorsteps we will never be forgiven. The result will be a death knell for the landed classes, not just here in South Ulster, but all over Ireland. (73-74)

Even if Clonroy understands the appeal to common humanity, he admits that at least in his own case, there are limits to compassion. “Whatever the cause”, he writes,

famine has prowled this island since God knows when, and will, till kingdom come. April to August. ‘The hungry months.’ Half a million starving more or less every year. Now with blight it’s multitudinous, a nation of diseased scarecrows, swarming on centuries of beggary[.] ... What happens when you see incurable beggary year in, year out? Indifference? Can’t admit to that! (83)

In the private sphere of his diary, Clonroy can vent his impatience with beggary and admit that he has perhaps become deaf to the clamour of Irish pover-

ty. In the entry quoted above, though, he never acknowledges that widespread poverty is, by and large, a result of the Irish land system, which is upheld by a small elite of landowners with substantial estates, like himself. The “titled descendant of a Cromwellian settler with twenty thousand acres of confiscated land”, as Murphy categorizes him (52), rebuffs Leslie’s suggestion that their elevated status is somewhat questionable:

Talked to me once about our rights here being suspect.

- Nothing here when we arrived, I said, but bush, bog and plain.

- And the native Irish! he said.

- We drained bogs and marshes, made roads. What’s suspect about building mills and manor houses, towns and villages? We civilised it. I refuse to be guilty about that.

He smiled. (79).

Yet Clonroy’s disparaging view of the Irish lower orders, culminating in his statement that there is “something not sane about the whole race” (86), contradicts the claim that his class have civilized the country. And in spite of his dismissive response to Leslie’s insinuation, he does entertain some doubts about the justifiability of his own position. He admits that the native Irish were “scattered” by his forefather who “came here land-hungry 1612 [f]rom English/Scottish borderlands” (88), and the knowledge of how the Skinners came to be the Lords Clonroy also seems to sit uneasily with him: “Act of Union bribe netted a peerage. Tittle, tittle, tattle, title and, hey presto, look ye, poor Skinner’s glorified to Clonroy” (90). According to Cecil Woodham-Smith, the Act of Union was passed “after bribery on a scale such as history has seldom witnessed”, and its “primary object ... was not to assist and improve Ireland but to bring her more completely into subjection.”¹³¹ An incident in September 1847 involving Festus Daly leaves Clonroy pondering over the possible downsides of the Union. Festus, formerly a soldier in Napoleon’s army, is now a tenant “in a rough mountainy area” on Clonroy’s estate, and in the eyes of his landlord, he is a “[c]omposite of everything that’s worst or ‘best’ in the Irish character. Depending on viewpoint” (85). Festus does pay his rent, but because of his disrespectful behaviour towards Clonroy and his agent, he is “thrown out, held, punched and kicked on the ground.” Regretting that his own anger has prevented him from putting a stop to the violence,

¹³¹ Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, pp. 15-16.

it dawns on Clonroy that this beating reflects one of the negative results of the Union:

History lesson for poor student. Act of Union. The Britannic Islands. 1800. John Bull bullying his rebellious daughter. Outraged by her defiance and hatred. Violates her even more. Like it or not, it seems like that. (87)

As an “ex-general, peer and landlord” (85), Clonroy is perceived by many Irishmen as an accomplice in England’s “bulling” of Ireland, and he realizes that this view might be valid: “No mean violator myself” (87).

Through Clonroy’s references to dispossession and subjugation, McCabe situates the Famine within the context of colonialism. So does Woodham-Smith, who ascribes the “wretchedness and misery” of the Irish peasants to

the system under which land had come to be occupied and owned in Ireland, a system produced by centuries of successive conquests, rebellions, confiscations and punitive legislation.¹³²

This is something that Edwards and Williams, Kinealy, and Donnelly mostly fail to do, but more recently, David Nally has convincingly argued that

the violence of conquest and plantation settlement, backed by the administrative and legal reorganization of indigenous society, contributed to acute poverty and rural stagnation and made subsistence crises a recurrent feature of Irish life. A similar example of official wrongdoing can be found in the British government’s attempt to use the Famine as a lever to accelerate socio-economic change. This policy arose from a dogmatic insistence on the laws of political economy and an equally firm belief, fostered through centuries of colonial contact, that the Irish were slovenly, improvident, and uncivilised, and therefore in need of external disciplining.¹³³

If violence marked the landlord-tenant relationship in pre-Famine Ireland (as Macken shows in *The Silent People*), it becomes even more pronounced during the Famine. Clonroy refers to the murder of Denis Mahon in 1847 and notes that altogether “nine agents and six landlords were assassinated that year” (89), but he does not mention that evictions, facilitated by the Gregory Clause, provoked such outrages. What McCabe is suggesting, then, is that violence bred violence, and whether it affected the whole country or was internalized within families as in the case of the Bradys, the Dalys, and the Callaghans, it was disabling and destructive. It is all summed up in Mary Brady’s anguished, unanswerable question: “Oh Jesus, why do we human families torture each other

¹³² Ibid., p. 20.

¹³³ Nally, *Human Encumbrances*, p. 229

the way we do" (121)? Clonroy reassures himself with the thought that it is "[h]ard to kill a man who can curse, sing, dance and tell jokes in [Irish]" like he can, and that he is not "hated ... the way Leitrim is, or Lansdowne" (85), but as reports of murders start to appear while hunger and suffering intensify, he realizes that he is not immune to violence. His last diary entry describes the solitary walk he takes after his son, who asserts that Anglo-Irish landlords are neither wanted nor needed in Ireland, announces his decision to convert and leave for Spain. "Wanted badly to get outside the walls", he writes, "revisit forbidden fields, townlands and river stretches where I'd played out of bounds before the walls went up. Dangerous now." In the secure space of his demesne, he walks

alongside the enclosing walls screening off what I'd no stomach to look at, hovels like rotten teeth in a green mouth, a silent countryside without cattle, sheep or fowl. Turfsmoke a reminder of whole families starving at the hearth.

The thought of this misery that he cannot bear to look at makes him ask himself if it is right to sell up and leave in the midst of famine and whether he really has been evading responsibility all along:

Am I deserting these fields, this house where I was born, this island I once so deeply loved, the speech I dreamt in as a child? And the people? I can ask the question now. Was there ever love, anywhere, at any time, between the dispossessed and those who dispossessed? (103)

With that last, rhetorical question, McCabe invites readers to consider the impact of colonialism on the relationship between landlords and tenants as well as between England and Ireland. Clonroy's story in particular suggests that if mutual antagonism impaired these relationships from the very beginning of the Ulster plantations, they became even more inflamed during the Famine.

"What is wrong? Who's to blame?" Clonroy asks in one of his last diary entries (80). As we have seen, the perceptions of who is responsible for the famine disaster vary, depending on point of view. To Mary Brady, the answer to the question of culpability is clear – both "England" and the landlord are to blame since the former provides inadequate relief and the latter rack-rents, distrains and evicts. Murphy's story contains no explicit accusations of any particular party, but the government is implicated as the culprit for devising a system of Poor Law relief which overtaxes the finances of the workhouse, and for allowing food to be exported from Ireland. "Famine?" Murphy asks, "[h]ow could it be? In a country exporting food on every tide" (50)? In addition to the Irish peasants and the Catholic Church, Clonroy blames estate agents,

“[m]iddle-class middlemen, gombeen men, all prospering, all mostly Irish”, who squeeze the rent from their poor tenants (77). And in his view, blame also attaches to the government since they have forced the whole burden of poor relief on the landlords. By enumerating these different views on the question of responsibility, McCabe suggests that the historiographical debate focusing on this issue tends to divert attention from what should be the main concern of any Famine narrative, namely the destructive effects the years of famine had on a large sector of Irish society, ranging from the landless labourers (Leslie’s “stray paupers”) and the tenant farmers to the insolvent landlord. So although it can be argued that McCabe’s representation of the Famine is post-revisionist since his characters make us consider the whole spectrum of possible culprits, *Tales from the Poorhouse* seems to resist unequivocal categorization within any of the historiographical paradigms outlined here.

With *Tales from the Poorhouse*, McCabe seeks to present a balanced view of the pressures and deprivations that all parties had to contend with during the Famine. His picture of life *within* the workhouse adds a dimension to the suffering of the destitute people, whether Catholic or Protestant, which is absent from both O’Flaherty’s and Macken’s novels. By delving into the past histories of his characters, McCabe also shows how the Famine compounded already long-standing suffering caused by alcoholism and domestic violence, physical as well as psychological, and how it may have generated an increasing rate of infanticide – not only because of starvation, as in the case of Sally Hanlon and her children in O’Flaherty’s novel, but also as the result of the fear of shame induced by religious mores. McCabe’s use of the vernacular in Roisin’s and Mary’s stories points up the cultural differences between the upper and lower classes in nineteenth-century Ireland, differences which are obscured by the standard English employed by Macken and O’Flaherty. Macken does attempt to convey a sense of these differences by inserting a number of gaelicisms into his text, but they come across as contrived and, therefore, do not serve his purpose. Moreover, while the absentee landlords in *Famine* and *The Silent People* are represented (or perhaps misrepresented) by their agents and have no voice of their own, McCabe emphasizes the importance of considering the landlord’s position and perspective by including Clonroy’s tale. The non-linear form of Clonroy’s intermittent diary entries underlines his inability to make sense of what is happening, of how it relates to the past, and of his own potential complicity in the unfolding disaster. In McCabe’s fictional world, the Famine disrupts and/or destroys the lives of everyone. In one way or another, nobody is exempt from blame, and so the line between victimizer and victimized is blurred. Yet taken

together, the four stories suggest that showing what an incomprehensible tragedy the Famine was is more important than dwelling on the question of responsibility. All things considered, then, I think that of the three novels studied here, *Tales from the Poorhouse* offers not only the most mature historiographical take on the Irish Famine, but also the best writing. As Dermot Bolger writes in his review of the book, “[i]t would be ironic if this small volume ... should prove the most powerful, authentic and lasting testament to this period and the most valuable reassessment of that time.”¹³⁴ But that is what it seems to be.

¹³⁴ Bolger, “A walk in the famine fields.”

CONCLUSION

Until those whose bodies lie in the desolate crowded graveyards ... of Ireland can tell the poor histories of their lives and deaths, what things were suffered by the people of all classes during the years of the famine of 1845, and onwards, can never be known.

Somerville and Ross¹

In this study of the Great Irish Famine in history-writing and prose fiction, I have investigated how the authors of all my chosen texts, both historical and fictional, represent this terrible event in Ireland's history, and to what extent fictional accounts of the period in the form of the novel are conditioned by historiographical interpretations. My analyses of the texts have considered the authors' view of the causes of the Famine, their assessment of the relief efforts, their conclusions regarding landlord and government responsibility, and their representation of the victims.

I have found that Liam O'Flaherty's novel is in many ways a corrective to John Mitchel's account of the Famine. While O'Flaherty's anti-imperialist attitude and nationalist sympathies are evident in the authorial comments which occasionally intrude on the narrative and, more often than not, incriminate the British government, most of his characters speak against the notion that the government alone was to blame for the disaster. Through their viewpoints, colonialism and its attendant land system, the failure of the Irish MPs to secure prompt and adequate government relief, social injustice, and the greed of gombeen men, landlords (whether Protestant or Catholic) and their agents for economic gain emerge as no less blameworthy than the government. So in spite of the author's political predisposition, the obvious disjunction between the teller and the tale regarding the question of culpability rules out the categorization of *Famine* as a clear exponent of the extreme nationalist view.

In Walter Macken's *The Silent People*, the author's pacifism contrasts with Mitchel's militant nationalism, particularly in the sympathetic picture he paints of Daniel O'Connell. And while Mitchel refutes the notion of "surplus" population, Macken implies that Ireland was in fact overpopulated by the middle of the nineteenth century. This led to the unrestrained sub-division of land and, consequently, increasing poverty, which in turn aggravated the impact of the potato blight on the poorest section of Irish society. As to the question

¹ Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, *The Big House of Inver* [1925] (Dublin: A&A Farman, 1999), p. 11.

of responsibility, Macken does not exonerate the landlords, but neither does he represent them as a homogeneous class of predators conspiring with the government to get rid of the cottiers and small tenant farmers. Similarly, he acknowledges the inadequacies of the various relief schemes and the adverse effects of their slow implementation, but makes it quite clear that the government alone could not be held responsible for creating the famine, as Mitchel would have it. In this respect, his interpretation contradicts Mitchel's polemic, yet it eschews the ostensible apologetics of the revisionists.

Eugene McCabe's take on the question of responsibility reflects the post-revisionist interpretation in that it does not exculpate the government, and also evident in *Tales from the Poorhouse* is the historians' ambivalence regarding landlord culpability. Thus while McCabe's landlord represents himself as a financially embarrassed victim of scapegoating and government policy, he is nevertheless troubled by the thought that he has not lived up to the responsibility that attaches to property. Yet in some respects, McCabe's fiction is at odds with the accounts of the post-revisionist historians examined here. While the historians focus on how the British press and certain individuals within the government blamed the Irish poor for bringing famine on themselves through their perceived improvidence, ignorance, and laziness, McCabe suggests that at least some Irish landlords concurred with this view. And by including colonialism as an underlying factor contributing to eventual famine, he adds a dimension to the various causes of the disaster that harks back to Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, but which is overlooked by Kinealy and Donnelly. Finally, the representation of the Catholic and Protestant clergy in the stories of the landlord and the workhouse master challenges the historical consensus that clerics of both denominations did all they could to alleviate the suffering of their starving and dying parishioners.

In the introduction to this study, I posed an additional question which is particularly relevant to the interpretation of historical events involving human suffering and trauma: can the putatively objective discourse of the historian which is based on documentary evidence and statistics engage the reader's empathy (as opposed to sympathy and pity) with the victims, or are fictional representations better suited to enable an empathetic response on the part of readers? I have come to the conclusion that, for various reasons, John Mitchel and the contributors to Edwards and Williams's *The Great Famine* largely fail to inspire empathy with the suffering and traumatized victims. Although Mitchel includes some harrowing descriptions of the afflicted people in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* and in his other writings, they mostly serve to underpin his

thesis that the British government saw the potato blight and the consequent famine as an opportunity to get rid of the “surplus population” of Ireland and, thereby, to make way for the civilization of the country on the English model which the Irish had resisted for centuries. As such, they solicit the sympathy and pity of readers by representing the victims as passive sufferers prostrated by a famine which “the English” had created. Yet Mitchel’s portrayal of the anonymous, spectral mass of ragged and emaciated people conveys a sense of otherness which impedes the affective bond that is conducive to empathy.

A similar anonymity characterizes the brief and generalizing references to the plight of the victims in T.P. O’Neill’s chapter on relief in *The Great Famine*, and William MacArthur in his medical history of the Famine is more concerned with mortality figures and factual descriptions of famine-related diseases than with the suffering of the sick and the dying. Because the victims in these chapters are regarded insufficiently from within, as Nicholas Mansergh put it, the possibility of an empathetic understanding of their traumatic experiences is diminished. Only Roger McHugh’s survey of Famine folklore goes some way to enabling such an understanding. By contrast, Cecil Woodham-Smith brings the human dimension of the Famine to the fore by incorporating a wide range of eyewitness accounts into her narrative. Christine Kinealy and James Donnelly, too, utilize these sources (although rather more sparingly) in order to convey a sense of the horrors of starvation, disease, evictions, and overcrowded workhouses. As Paul Ricoeur proposed, the stories told by eyewitnesses are living presentations which “place the events before our eyes, as if we were there.”² Yet even if the accounts of contemporary observers make the awful consequences of famine “visible” to readers, they rarely mediate the actual experiences of individual victims.

In my analyses of Mitchel’s *The Last Conquest of Ireland* and of the three novels, I have also considered what tone each writer uses and how this affects dialogicality. I have found that the assertive tone Mitchel assumes, particularly in his take on the question of responsibility, tends to stifle any objections readers might have to his predominantly subjective, polemical interpretation. Consequently, there is little or no room for a constructive dialogue between writer and reader. By contrast, Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine* is not entirely dominated by the author’s personal opinions. Although O’Flaherty’s anti-imperialist attitude and nationalist sympathies occasionally invade the narrative, the novel’s focus on several characters’ views as to who or what to blame for the Famine

² See Chapter 5, n. 58.

undermines his subjective judgements. This novel, then, opens up a discussion in which readers, too, can ultimately join. In Walter Macken's *The Silent People*, the authorial voice is relatively unintrusive and the author is at pains to offer an objective view of the issues he addresses. Even if his own standpoint is discernible at times, his non-coercive tone allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Eugene McCabe's use of the dramatic monologue in *Tales from the Poorhouse* precludes authorial intrusions that might come across as polemical and coercive. By having his characters express divergent and often conflicting views (which are not necessarily his own), he allows for an even-handed discussion of the controversies and uncertainties that are still evident in both historical and fictional representations of the Great Famine.

Although the "poor histories" of those who suffered and died during the Famine can never be *known* because their testimonies are virtually absent from the historical record, the novels of O'Flaherty, Macken, and McCabe enable the imaginative recovery of such histories. Their portrayals of the struggle to survive, of how their characters cope – or fail to cope – with deprivation, oppression, hunger, and the loss of family members to illness and death help readers to gain a deeper understanding of the personal tragedies behind the statistics and the eyewitness accounts provided by the historians. In describing the physical and mental toll taken on the fictional characters by the effort to survive, and their gradual wearing down by destitution, starvation, disease, and the emotional stress which, for some of them, culminates in apathy and insanity, the novels epitomize Paul Ricoeur's concept of the individuation of horror which brings us closer to the Other in empathy and imagination. As a result, they complement histories of the Famine by affording glimpses of what the experience of famine, pestilence, and dispossession might have been like for the ordinary people.

Yet in the texts I have analysed here, the problem of adequately representing the Famine as a whole is evident. The core of this problem for both historians and novelists is the difficulty of combining, in the words of Colm Tóibín, "the sheer scale of the tragedy in all its emotion and catastrophe, the complex society which surrounded it and the high politics which governed it."³ By reading the novels in the context of historical writings on the Famine, I have sought to demonstrate that, as Ricoeur proposes, "the mutual interplay of two narrative genres ... is required in order to articulate [the historical] experience."⁴ Through the interaction of history, which provides facts and explanation, and

³ Tóibín and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 42.

⁴ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 294.

prose fiction, which emphasizes the personal experiences of the victims, a comprehensive representation of the enormous scale of the Famine, of its political, economic, and social causes and consequences, and the human suffering it involved is made possible. But if there is still no single text that offers such a synthesis of the two genres, we must look to both in order to arrive at some understanding of the event that was the Great Irish Famine.

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Svensk sammanfattning

Denna tvärvetenskapliga studie kontextualiserar den skönlitterära framställningen av hungersnöden i Irland i mitten av 1800-talet i förhållande till tre olika faser av irländsk historieskrivning – den nationalistiska, den revisionistiska, och den postrevisionistiska – med syfte att granska i vilken mån prosafiktionen antingen återspeglar eller motsäger historikernas tolkningar. År 1845 drabbades landet av en dittills okänd potatispest som förstörde skörden helt eller delvis under de följande fem åren. Missväxten ledde till utbredd svält och epidemiska sjukdomar som dödade åtminstone en miljon människor, medan ytterligare en och en halv miljon flydde, huvudsakligen till Förenta Staterna, England, och Kanada. I sina försök att hitta en rationell förklaring till hur potatispesten kunde utvecklas till den värsta svältkatastrofen i Europa under modern tid, har historiker påvisat ett antal bidragande faktorer, till exempel överbefolkning, de fattigaste jordlösa småbrukarnas och lantarbetarnas beroende av potatisen som sitt baslivsmedel, underutveckling inom jordbruket, det rådande jordegendomssystemet, och den dåvarande brittiska regeringens misslyckande att tillhandahålla effektiv och tillräcklig nödhjälp.

Historiska förklaringar är naturligtvis nödvändiga för att vi skall kunna bilda oss en uppfattning om hungersnödens orsaker och konsekvenser, men svårigheten med att skildra offrens situation i en historiografisk analys baserad på fakta är uppenbar då deras egna vittnesmål till största delen saknas i källmaterialet. Följaktligen finns det en risk att historieskrivningen förmörkar det som onekligen var centrala realiteter för de värst drabbade, nämligen svält, vräkning, sjukdom och död. Här kan skönlitteraturen bidra till att komplettera historien. Genom att fokusera på ett specifikt (fiktivt) samhälle och dess (fiktiva) individer, kan skönlitterära verk ge en inblick i hur hungersnöden interverkade på olika samhällsskikt, vad människorna gjorde för att överleva, hur nöden och fasorna påverkade deras psyke, och vad eller vem de höll ansvariga för katastrofen. Å andra sidan kan denna fokusering innebära att författaren misslyckas med att ge en helhetsbild av hungersnödens enorma omfattning och att redogöra för alla faktorer som orsakade och förlängde den. Paul Ricoeurs teori om samspelet mellan historia och fiktion (the interweaving of history and fiction) är därför ett nyckelbegrepp för att bättre förstå denna traumatiska period i Irlands historia.

Avhandlingen omfattar en textanalytisk, komparativ kritik av ett antal historiska och skönlitterära verk. Genom närläsning av dessa texter granskar jag vilka aspekter av hungersnöden (politiska, ekonomiska, sociala) de olika förfat-

tarna valt att behandla, och på vilket sätt, samt hur deras synvinklar har format tolkningarna i sin helhet. I detta sammanhang tar jag också upp skillnaderna mellan fakta och fiktion, och speciellt de etiska problem som är förknippade med skildringen av traumatiska händelser och mänskligt lidande. Samtidigt undersöker jag, med hänvisning till Roger D. Sells kommunikationsteori, huruvida vissa författare anslår en påstridig ton i sina verk och hur detta påverkar dialogen mellan författare och läsare. Med utgångspunkt i Ricoeurs teori argumenterar jag för att historia och fiktion inte bör ses som ömsesidigt antitetiska diskurser i skildringen och tolkningen av det förflutna, och att skönlitteraturen genom fokuseringen på offren, som ofta tenderar att reduceras till statistik i historieskrivningen, kan förmedla en bättre förståelse och en djupare känsla för den mänskliga dimensionen av den tragedi som utspelades under hungeråren.

This interdisciplinary study analyses three 20th century fictional representations of the Great Irish Famine in relation to nationalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist historical interpretations of the event. It examines how writers of history and fiction respectively portray the causes and consequences of the famine, and particularly how they view the question of responsibility, which is still a matter of contention.

Gunilla Bexar asks to what extent the fictional representations reflect or resist the interpretations of the historians, and how the two genres attempt to make the experiences of the victims visible to readers. The study provides further historical context by incorporating contemporary eye-witness accounts, official correspondence, and newspaper reports in the analyses.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of the interweaving of history and fiction, Bexar argues that literature plays an important part in the shaping of historical consciousness. History and fiction should not be seen as mutually antithetical discourses in the representation of the past since fiction, through its focus on the victims, who are often reduced to statistics in history-writing, can mediate a deeper understanding of the human tragedy that epitomizes the Great Irish Famine.



ISBN 978-951-765-824-9